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A TOUGH BOY; or, The Dwarf's Revenge.

BY PHILIP S. WARNE,

AUTHOR OF "PATENT-LEATHER JOE," "DESPARD, THE DUELIST," "ALWAYS ON HAND," ETC., ETC.



CHARLEY GAZED UPON THE WONDER IN RAPTURE. HONEST JACK LOOKED ABOUT HIM WITH A HALF-TERRIFIED LOOK.
"IT'S THE DEVIL'S WORK," HE SAID, GLOOMILY.

A Tough Boy; OR, The Dwarf's Revenge.

A Story of a Wonderful Cave.

BY PHILIP S. WARNE,

AUTHOR OF "PATENT-LEATHER JOE," "DESPARD, THE DUELIST," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

HONEST JACK.

STANDING in the broad illumination of a crackling camp-fire, Honest Jack was a magnificent specimen of the hardy manhood produced in Dame Nature's out-door work-shop. Deep chested and broad-shouldered, and with his face bronzed nearly to the color of his leathern jerkin, he stood six feet in his moccasins.

With an eight-inch bowie he was putting the finishing touches to a fine bear-skin, which he had stretched between two saplings, so that the smoke from the camp-fire blew against the moist inner surface, while from a tree-limb hard by hung the fat and juicy hind-quarters of the animal that scarce an hour before, had held undisputed possession of the same.

On the other side, the fire shone into the front of a brush lean-to, making as cosy a retreat from the chill night-winds as any hunter need wish.

But, hark!—a ringing halloo, that wakes the echoes among the crags at the further side of the mountain gorge.

"The boy—at last!" cried Honest Jack, abruptly suspending his labor and standing in an attitude of expectancy, while his face glowed with a look of glad affection.

A moment later a youth, not so tall as the brawny hunter, and much slighter in build, yet withal as springy a young athlete as ever won the heart of blushing maidenhood, bounded into the circle of firelight, crying cheerily:

"Hollo, old man! Your usual good luck. By Jove! where did you bag that prize?"

"The woods is full of 'em, Charley."

"Yet I am empty-handed. That's my old song!"

"Better luck next time, boy."

"But never a better appetite! I say, old man!—if I ever get back to civilization, the gov'nor 'll think that I've come to eat him out of house and home, and will ship me back here, so as not to hopelessly bankrupt the family exchequer."

"I hope to God he may!" cried Honest Jack, his voice vibrant with deep feeling. "But lay into that thar b'ar; an' don't spile the taste by talkin' about shakin' the only country the Lord ever made fur his own livin', to go back to the States, whar every man feeds on what he kin steal from his neighbors. Dog my cats ef I kin see what ye want better'n this hyar."

"You're a good fellow, Jack. I believe you'd be sorry to lose me—wouldn't you?"

"Cheese it, boy! Don't make a doggoned fool o' yerself ur me."

And Honest Jack turned abruptly away to resume his work on the bearskin.

"What yer been up to to-day?" he asked, by way of diversion.

Charley brightened instantly.

"By Jove! what do you think? I've found a new house! We must shake this gusty barn. *Br-r-r!* I haven't got the ice-water off my legs yet from that last cold rain. But I've struck a palace, where we can live like princes, blow high, blow low."

"Waal," said Honest Jack, with the air of a man defending his fireside from reproach, "I don't hang out fur to be nary jedge o' palaces, but I've sampled tepees, an' I've smothered in wicki-ups; an' dang my skin ef I ever see anythin' much to beat a bresh lean-to with a bresh fire in front of it!"

"Oh, but you never saw anything like my cave of wonders—that's what I call it. Aladdin's wouldn't be a patch on it! It is one continuous blaze of glory! However, I'll not insist on moving our traps until you have seen it. After that you won't need any urging—my word for it—unless from sheer obstinacy. What a hard-headed old chap you are, pard. But then I've seen worse; and I wouldn't—Eh! what's the matter?"

For, looking up, with a smile, from his occupation of arranging his steak, now done to a turn, on a platter no less primitive than a piece of bark freshly stripped from its tree, Charley

discovered that his partner had wheeled round, his face pale, his eyes dilated, his jaw dropped—a picture of horror. Then, as if from sudden weakness, he sat, indeed, fairly dropped down upon a log which served them as a seat, and resting his elbows on his knees, and taking his head between his hands, gazed gloomily into the fire.

"Why, old man, you look as if you couldn't toe the scratch for another round. What have I said or done to knock you out?"

"Nothin'—nothin', boy. Go fur yer prevention. Don't wait fur me."

"Eh? Don't wait for you? I don't usually have to!"

"Waal, I'm refusin' my oats fur one't."

And Honest Jack sighed dismally.

"Look here, pardner," said Charley, now beginning to look serious, "there must be something wrong, if you let good victuals go begging. What is it, Jack? Speak up, old man!"

And going over to his comrade, he put his hand on his shoulder encouragingly.

Jack seized his other hand, and wrung it with a grip that, six months before, would have made Charley wince and beg for mercy; and looking up, with a suspicion of humidity about the eyes, said, huskily:

"Boy, it's becuz I've got a—a—a sort o'—*sneakin' notion* fur ye—that's it! Some has it fur women critters; an' some has it fur hosses an' dogs, an' sich like animiles—only not so bad. An' now you're booked fur up the flume; an' it cuts me up like sin!"

"Oh, nonsense, Jack!" cried Charley, flushing with that sense of embarrassment with which a man bears another openly declare his love for him, yet none the less gripping more firmly, with a responsive emotion, the hand that clasped his. "Up the flume indeed! What put that notion into your head?"

"It's all along o' the ha'nted cave!" said Jack, with a gloomy shake of the head. "The on-lucky galoot that stumbles into the devil's den is under a spell."

"Hol hol! Is it possible that you are so superstitious as that? Why, old man, there are no such things as haunted caves and spells, and such grannies' bugaboos. All of those things went out of date long ago, and are used now only to amuse children."

"Don't larf, boy, at what older men than you ur me can't understand. But, what's the use o' talkin'? You're spotted; an' you'll walk straight into it, blind!"

"See here, Jack, what makes you think this particular cave haunted?"

"Boy," replied Jack, hollowly, "I don't think it; I know it! You've hearn tell how this hyar country was cleaned out a year ago by the Injuns, an' all the fust drove o' whites either killed off ur run off?"

"Yes."

"Waal, I was one of the fust to strike this range, an' the last to git. They druv a land-office biz in them days, you bet! Wash gold was cheaper'n sawdust, an' ye could go out ary mornin' an' pick up a hatful o' nuggets as big as birds' eggs before breakfast. Oh, but this hyar was the garden-spot fur road-agents and card sharps! At night the pistol-shots was like the patter o' hail on a shanty roof, an' in the mornin' they used to gather up the stiffs an' pile 'em, like cord-wood."

"Waal, to start the thing along, a young tenderfoot, with a head full o' book-larnin', but not much savvy fur nothin' else, goes off with an Injun to see a wonderful medicine cave. He next turns up at the foot of a cliff, with nary a bull bone in his skin, an' the Injun—he's *nowhar!*"

"Next a brace o' pards struck it. That night thar was a thunderin' row heard in the room whar they slep, an' they was found—one on the bed with a knife-hole in him that ye could drive a mule through, an' in his grip a pistol o' the same caliber as a hole betwixt the eyes o' t'other, who laid on the floor with a bloody knife in his fist."

"The next lucky man wanted to raise a company to reconnoiter the place. He jest lays down on a bench in Dan McAffrey's saloon, an' when shuttin'-up time comes, thar's yer Mister Man, as dead as a smelt. Thar wa'n't a scratch on him nowhars."

"All of which is easily enough explained," urged Charley. "The first case may have been a treacherous murder, for the purpose of robbery; or the tenderfoot may have fallen over the cliff, and the Indian run away, for fear of being accused of his murder. The pards quarreled—not an unusual thing, surely, and the next man died of heart disease."

"Oh, yes!" retorted Honest Jack, sarcastic-

ally, "them kind o' things is happenin' every day—*jest after runnin' into ha'nted caves!* But wait a bit—I had a side-pardner, with his good pints as well as his bad—a mighty handy man in an Injun scrimmage, that never took water short o' ten to one, an' even then not without swipin' a few fur luck; but one day he tumbled into camp, lookin' wild an' white, an' shakin' as ef he had the chills, an' allowed it was up stakes an' git. I put two an' two together, an' I says, says I—

"Joe, have you been a-saltin' o' some pore galoot up to Ridley?"

"He jest looked at me as ef he thought I was the devil, an' never opened his yawp; so I allowed I'd fetched the bull's-eye."

"But Jack Mowbray ain't goin' back on a pardner, ye understand, when he's in a hole, no matter how he come to git thar; so I says, says I:—

"Accidents will happen in the best regulated families. It's all right, Joe. Whoever comes fur my pard, comes fur me."

"But he only bulges out his eyes like a crazy man, an' yells an' begins to talk about a ha'nted cave, an' allows as how the devil's a-callin' o' him down below, an' goes clean off his head. An' that night, while all sin was to pay in the shape o' greased lightnin' an' t'arnal smash, he skips the camp, makes a bee-line fur a mountain run that goes down into the bowels o' the airth through a sink-hole, piles in, an'—*good by John!*"

"Delirium tremens complicated with a belief that he was under a spell," was Charley's explanation. "Wasn't he a drinking man?"

"Joe liked whisky," admitted Jack; "but, boy, ye hyar me?—the divil had his grip on him!"

"Well, Jack," said Charley, hopeless of shaking the superstition that had found such firm lodgment in his partner's mind, "I see that it will do no good to argue with you. But tomorrow I'll show you what 'book-larnin'' can do to lay ghosts. Meanwhile, here's to the bottom of your stomach!"

And he cheerily proffered a pannikin of steaming hot coffee.

True to his word, next day Charley proposed to let Jack see the cave before insisting on removal; but the hunter said:

"No, boy. What is to be, will be. It's plain you're sot to go, an' the sooner it's done, the sooner ye'll be out o' yer misery."

So forthwith they packed their "traps," slung them between two saplings which they bore on their shoulders, and so marched to their new quarters.

The mouth of the cave was in the base of a cliff not less than five hundred feet high, its perpendicular face beautifully variegated by differently-colored strata. Huge crags blocked the way, and quite hid the black opening from passing observation. But he who ventured to enter that forbidding portal, was rewarded within by a spectacle such as human eyes seldom rested on.

Imagine a vast cathedral of jasper, with pillars and groined arches and pendants and chandeliers and hanging galleries and pulpits and altars and confessionals, of every variety and shade of color, into the substance of some of which the eye could penetrate as into clouded glass, while others were like polished marble—the whole illuminated by the torches of a procession of priests going to midnight prayers.

Flaring his pine-knot above his head Charley gazed upon the wonder in rapture. Honest Jack looked about him with a half-terrified look.

"It's the devil's work," he said, gloomily.

"He has the savvy an' the imps to his hand, to make things as is takin' to the eye o' mortal man, so's to entice him to whar he kin clap onto his soul. We're both into it now, so that salt won't save us. It won't make much matter whar we camp down, I allow right hyar's as good as we'll git. We can't be too handy to that thar openin'."

That night Honest Jack went to sleep with his usual promptitude, ghosts or no ghosts; while Charley lay awake for what seemed to him hours, watching the opaline reflections of the firelight from the walls and ceiling of their wonderful abode.

Did his eyes close in sleep at last? Did he dream; or was it reality? From behind the columns and stalagmites crept ghost-like forms. As silent as moving shadows, they pressed round, trailing over him their misty robes, the touch of which was like the breath of a cold wind. They bent over him, gazing at him with eyes that were centers of darkness, streaming shadows as the sun casts bars of light.

They seemed to converse with voices that

were only sighing moans, not broken into words like human speech. Over his face and body and limbs they passed their fleshless hands, so icy that his clothing offered no protection from their unearthly chill; and wherever they went they left his flesh turned to marble.

In an agony of horror indescribable, he burst the accursed spell, and fairly leaped into wakefulness.

CHAPTER II. A MYSTERY.

BUT what wonder was this? Had the caverned rocks vanished from above their heads?

He stood beneath the open sky, with the sun half-way up to the zenith, in a world transformed since yesterday. Snow covered all the ground, and burdened the trees.

And there was the lean-to, with all their "plunder," just as if it had never been moved!—and Honest Jack, wrapped in his blanket, asleep, and snoring lustily.

What! at this time of day? It must be nine o'clock, at least!

It was inexplicable that Charley should have so overslept himself; but for Jack—that was a miracle indeed!

Amazed, he went to him and shook him, saying:

"Wide awake here, old man! That spell has fallen—Good Heavens! what is the matter with him? Jack! Jack!"

But Jack responded to neither voice nor touch. He lay like a log, his heavy breathing showing that his sleep was not a natural one.

Men living in the wilderness learn heroic remedies. Drawing his ramrod, Charley fell to whipping his partner with a vigor that meant kill or cure.

It was effective, for Honest Jack, his nerves of sense atingle with pain, soon began to writhe, then to mutter, then to cry out, and finally to swear with an eloquence that left no doubt of the full restoration of his powers. And scrambling to his feet he, in his first bewilderment, would have "tackled" his boy with "demoralizing" effect, but that Charley leaped aside, crying:

"Hold on, Jack—it is only I! What has got into you, old man, that you have to be turned out of bed in this style?"

Honest Jack rubbed his eyes and stared about in bewilderment—he whose wits had never before gone wool-gathering.

"What in Cain's the matter?" he asked, his tongue seeming thick. "What was ye trouncin' of me so fur?"

"Why, I couldn't wake you up—and the day half gone!"

"Ye couldn't wake me up! Wa'al, I never had to be waked up before, sense the ole man used to sw'ar he'd fetch the hoss-whip up in the garret, ef I didn't l'arn to stir my lazy bones. But that was always a right smart spell before sun-up.

"Aw—w—w!" yawned the bewildered hunter, stumbling forward, "my head feels like a stone. It's all along o' that doggone cave. I've been dreamin' about it all night long."

"You have been dreaming about it? Why so have I. What was your dream?"

"I dre'mt we'd shook this hyar camp, an' packed our traps to that devil's dance-house. An' a goshawful place it was, too. The rocks was piled before the door as if giants, a mile ur so high, had been heavin' 'em at one another, fur brick-bats, in a free fight. Inside it was all made o' glass, a-shinin' in the fire-light with all the colors o' the rainbow. Thar was p'int a-hangin' down from the top, an' p'int a-stickin' up from the bottom; an' some o' 'em had come together, till they looked like the posts that hold up the roof in the Catholic cathedral, in St. Louis. But, Lord! it jest took the shine off'n ary church you ever see in all yer born days!"

"Why, Jack!" cried Charley, "that was my dream, exactly! And you have described the place as perfectly as if you had really been there. You must have seen it;—haven't you, now? How else could you know about the rocks before the mouth of the cave?"

Jack stared at his boy. Then his eyes wandered about the lean-to.

"How did our fire come to burn out so completely?" asked Charley, following the direction of his glance.

Jack flirited the snow away with his foot, uncovering dry ashes.

"Boy," he said, solemnly, "that fire was out an' the ashes cold when the snow fell."

"That's so," admitted Charley, but plainly making nothing of the fact.

"Thar hain't been no fresh fire thar sence yestid'y mornin'."

"Why, we cooked our supper there last night."

"No, we didn't."

"But, Jack, how can you say that, when you know that we let the supper grow cold listening to your yarn?"

"That was *night before last*!"

"And we have slept thirty-six hours? Oh, nonsense!"

"I wish it wa'n't nothin' worse'n nonsense, boy," said Jack, gloomily.

He went about, closely examining everything in the lean-to, while Charley watched him, wondering.

"Well?" he asked, when Jack was through.

"We'll put somethin' solid in our bread-baskets—we'll need it before the day's out,—an' then we'll take a leetle tramp, ef you're agreed."

As said, so done; and to Charley's surprise Jack led off, following without hesitation the course over which in his dream—if it was a dream—they had borne their camp equipage to the cave.

"Jack, you have been here before," he cried.

"Never, till yestid'y," was the somber reply.

Lighting a couple of pine knots, they entered.

"Thar," said Jack, pointing to a heap of ashes, "thar's whar we cooked last night's supper. Feel fur yerself. The ashes is warm yit."

Charley thrust his hand into the ashes. It was as Jack said. They were warm.

"It certainly looks as if we had been here," said Charley, more puzzled than ever before in his life. "That is the exact spot."

"Then how did we git back to the lean to?"

"Well, as improbable as it seems, Jack, I can reach but one conclusion. The boogerish story connected with this place, must have affected us both so that we actually packed our plunder back to camp in our sleep."

Jack looked at his boy mournfully, as if he believed him honest in his persistent doubts of what seemed to be glaring facts, but acting under some malign influence that clouded his understanding.

"Boy," he said, "air you in the habit o' walkin' in yer sleep?"

"Not that I ever knew of," Charley was forced to admit.

"Have ye ever seen me walk in my sleep?"

"Never."

"Waal, then?"

To Honest Jack this seemed conclusive.

Charley was at a loss for an answer to rebut his logic.

"Boy," he went on, in hopeless tones, "air ye still sot on livin' hyar?"

Charley hesitated. He could not deny that a chill of dread was creeping over him, in spite of his bright young bravery.

"I hate to give it up so, Jack," he said. "But since you make such a point of it, perhaps it is hardly fair for me to insist, merely to gratify my own whim."

Without a word further, Honest Jack led the way out.

They returned to the camp in silence. In silence they sat down, with nothing to do but twiddle their thumbs. The place seemed as desolate as if a death had occurred there.

You may believe that the situation was not improved when it began to snow again, so heavily that objects became invisible at a distance of ten or fifteen rods.

"By Jove!" cried Charley, "it can't keep that sort of thing up long without spoiling our hunt. Who ever heard of the season closing in so early as this? And everything was so promising only yesterday!"

"Boy," said Jack, significantly, "the turn in our luck come when we sot foot in the ha'nted cave!"

"Now, look here, Jack," cried Charley, with a touch of impatience, "if you're going to do nothing but sit there and groan like Jeremiah, the sooner we strike camp and go where there's a little more cheerful company to be had, the better."

Honest Jack looked reproachfully at his boy. But youth is proverbially ungrateful and heady.

With the approach of the early twilight, the temperature suddenly fell below zero, and the wind rose, sweeping the snow in blinding clouds; here baring the ground as with a besom, and there piling huge drifts.

In their cosy retreat, with the savor of broiling bear-steak in their nostrils, they without apprehension saw the night close in, and heard the wind howl its dreary accompaniment to the merry crackle of their hickory fire.

But when they had eaten their fill, and added the one thing needful to turn earth into a hea-

ven of perfect content—a lazy pipe, then were they roused from their dreamy repose by stumbling footsteps; and out of the darkness and whirling snow came an intruder, so uncouth in appearance that brave Charley Grover was actually startled, and Honest Jack at once jumped to the conclusion that it was the Evil One, come to wreak some mysterious vengeance for their intrusion into the haunted cave.

Stalking boldly up to the fire, the stranger demanded in a churlish tone and with a frown of suspicious hatred, as if they were trespassers:

"Who the devil be you, and what d'ye want round hyar?"

And so formidable was his aspect, and so menacing his mien, that Honest Jack's hand sought the haft of his bowie, while Charley hastily drew and cocked his revolver.

Seeing the boy's defensive preparations, the intruder uttered a snarl of seeming rage, and made a feint to rush upon him.

He received for his pains two lightning-like shots in the breast, and, an instant later, the point of Honest Jack's bowie, driven with a force that would have buried it to the hilt in anything human; while the stout hunter clutched him by the throat and drew back his hand for another thrust.

With a sweep of his mighty arm the stranger hurled his assailant aside, as if he were a mere boy, and then stood laughing derisively at his amazed antagonists.

CHAPTER III.

THE SILVER BULLET.

How shall we describe the strange monster, with his massive head, his Herculean shoulders, his arms so out of proportion that his knotty hands reached to his knees, and his whole stature shortened, as if by compression endwise, until he could have stood under Charley's extended arm?

A grizzled mass of coarse, wiry hair and beard, falling to his waist, nearly hid his bestial features and large, leathery ears; while his eyes gleamed through the tangle like the dilated orbs of a madman, and his teeth like the yellow fangs of some beast of prey.

His head was bare. A disemboweled mountain goat, wrapped in its own skin, was slung on his back, its feet being tied in a bunch so as to loop over his forehead.

He was clothed in the shaggiest of buffalo-skins, his breast being protected by the mass of matted hair which makes the forehead of the "king of the plains" proof against a rifle-ball. So had he been able to defy Charley's revolver and Jack's bowie.

Before they had recovered from their amazement he coolly turned away, threw his goat on the ground, stepped up to the haunch of tear's meat, and without ceremony cut off a huge slice; then, squatting before the fire, held it to broil, heeding his enforced entertainers no more than if they were not present.

Jack was seized by an almost insane impulse to slay the monster as he would a wild beast; but an overpowering sense of human helplessness against the powers of darkness paralyzed his arm. He sat wrapped in gloom.

Free from superstitious fears, Charley was only vexed.

So sat the three in profound silence.

But the hot blood of youth would not long brook this, and presently Charley burst forth:

"See here, my Christian friend, we have no objection to your making free with anything you find in our camp, but we should be glad to have you tell us who you are and where you come from."

The stranger was now busy with his scantily-cooked steak which, held in both hands, he tore with his teeth and chewed with the voracity of a dog. He paid no heed whatever to the youth's address.

Charley frowned and bit his lip.

But there was nothing to do but swallow the indignity or fight, and he was not yet quite ready for the latter course.

When he had gorged himself, the intruder turned and scanned the real owners of the camp with sullen curiosity for a moment, and then growled:

"Now I'm ready to hyear what ye've got to say fur yerselves. Who be ye anyhow, an' what the devil air ye hangin' round hyar fur?"

At this Charley fired up.

"Considering that you probably owe your life to the existence of our camp here, don't you think it would be—"

"Shet up, young 'un!" was the prompt disposal of his remarks, the speaker not taking the

trouble to look his way, though the youth leaped to his feet and drew his revolver with wrath in his eyes.

But, though he had caught, as from the atmosphere of the region, a greater readiness with weapons than would have been looked for in the East, our young hunter was no ruffian, and could not shoot down a man who made no effort to defend himself.

From a less formidable antagonist he would have compelled recognition by a blow; but he was too prudent to place himself within the sweep of those powerful arms.

The fixed regard of the stranger demanding a reply from him, Jack spoke:

"We air honest hunters, as don't ax no man's leave ur license to camp wharever wood grows an' water runs, an' the Lord leaves his critters to range on a free hoof. I'm Jack Mowbray, at yer sarvice, the which no man kin say as I owe him anythin'; an' this hyar is my pard, Charley Grover, lately from the States, but no greenhorn, ye onderstand; which the same, the man that crowds him has got to git away with Jack Mowbray, every time! Now, who air you?"

"That's none o' yer doggone business!" was the contemptuous rebuff. "Thar's jest one thing I've got to say to you. Take a friend's advice. Quit nosin' around, an' git out o' this hyar section. Ye onderstand? Git!"

And stretching himself on the ground, with his feet to the fire and his head on a log, the stranger seemed to sink at once into profound slumber, so perfect was his unconcern as to how his insults would be taken.

Honest Jack, who had never before rested patiently under an indignity from any man, now showed no sign of resentment, but sat gazing dejectedly into the fire.

This exasperated Charley more than anything that had been put upon him. He loved Jack, and respected him thoroughly; and to see his manhood sapped by a vulgar superstition was intolerably galling.

Drawing near to him, he said:

"Jack, must we stand this?"

"Boy, it's no use," was the despondent reply. "What's to come o' this thing, will come of it. This hyar's a warnin'. It ain't all as gits 'em. An' I reckon it'll stan' us in hand to give it heed, an' git while we're let to, without no bend'rance."

"No, by Heaven!" cried the youth, goaded beyond further endurance.

And before Jack suspected what he was about to do, he caught up a hickory branch, lying at hand, and struck the sleeper a stinging blow with it; then leaped back, with his cocked revolver, held in readiness for the expected onslaught.

"I'll plant the next two between his eyes!" he cried, through his set teeth.

Jack had cried:

"Boy! boy!—fer God's sake!"—and stretched forth his hand to stop the blow. But when it was given beyond recall, he went with his boy, however rash.

Afraid of the issue in a close encounter, he too drew and cocked his revolver.

But all this was uncalled for.

The sleeper never moved!

Could it be that he was insensible to the blow? It had fallen, not where his body was protected by the buffalo-skin, but across his cheek and ear.

Charley stared, open-mouthed.

Jack let his muscles relax, then lowered the hammer of his revolver, and returned the weapon to its place in his belt, shaking his head gloomily.

"It ain't no manner o' use," he said. "Ye might load him with bullets an' he wouldn't feel nary one of 'em. The devil's in it;—you kin see that fur yerself."

Baffled at every point, Charley was almost beside himself with bursting rage.

"If it wouldn't be murder," he cried, "I'd mighty soon show you whether he is bullet-proof or not. I've a mind to clip his ear, or his nose, just to show you that I can draw blood from him, as from any other man."

But Jack rose and stood between them.

"Put up your weepin', boy," he besought, rather than directed. "The devil's a-temptin' of ye too fur."

And as one with faint show of resistance submits to the restraint of a friend, in a quarrel which he is half willing to quit if it can be done with dignity, Charley allowed Jack to disarm him and return his revolver to its holster.

"Promise me ye won't do nothin' brash, onless called to self-defense," still further urged Honest Jack.

But it was not to be expected that Charley would do this directly.

"It's a confounded shame to be so put upon, when one man is no better than another," he said, his milder tone satisfying Jack, who went and lay down, leaving his boy to fix the fire for the night, preparatory to himself turning in.

If the hunter had put his feeling into words, it would have been to this effect:

"Sleepin' ur wakin', it's all one. Nothin' human kin head off the devil, onc't he's sot fur ye."

But Charley could not so yield events to fate. He dreaded to place himself at the mercy of the strange intruder, by falling asleep. Yet, seeing the others so unconcerned, he felt ashamed of his own restlessness, as if it were cowardly.

He resolved to feign a composure he did not feel, and at the same time put himself in the best position to detect any attempt at treachery.

Lying down where his face, turned toward the stranger, would yet be in partial shadow, so that at the distance that separated them, it could not be readily seen whether his eyes were open or shut, he held his cocked revolver in readiness under cover of a fold of his blanket, and set himself thus to watch through the night.

For hours he kept up this vigil; but gradually in the perfect quiet of everything—for the stranger never moved—his nervous excitement wore away; his posture was favorable to sleep; the monotonous moaning of the wind, as its force lessened toward morning, lulled his attention, and without warning he lapsed into unconsciousness.

He woke with a start, and sprung at once to a sitting posture. Honest Jack was standing before him, and a cloud of sparks and ashes rising from the waning fire showed that he had just thrown a heavy stick upon it, the noise of which had startled Charley into wakefulness.

The stranger whom he had set himself to watch so faithfully, had disappeared.

"Is it possible?" cried Charley, crimsoning with chagrin, "that I am such a dunderhead as to let the whole camp be carted off while I sleep straight ahead? Where is that fellow gone, and when?"

"Ax them as knows," replied Jack, gloomily.

"What! didn't you see him leave?"

"Nary!"

"You were asleep?"

"Like a stone."

Charley stared open mouthed.

"D'ye think them kind makes a row when they want to go anyw'ers?" asked Jack. "He went as he come; an' for my part, I think we're well shut of him."

"He took his goat with him."

"All the better fur us. Ef he'd left it behind ketch me a touchin' of it! It 'ud only 'a' brung us bad luck."

"Well," said Charley, with a firm set of the lips, "I don't propose to give this thing up so."

"What's that, boy?"

"I mean to find out something more about that gentleman. See! here is his trail. You observe that he leaves tracks like an ordinary mortal."

"Yes," admitted Jack; "but he needn't do it ef he didn't want to. You wouldn't go fur to foller them?"

"I shan't do anything else!"

"Hold on, boy! As like's not, knowin' yer hot temper, he left them thar fur jest nothin' at all, only to lead ye into some devil's trap. What else should he do it fur, when he could jest as easy go off through the air, ur down into the groun'? Hearken to sense, boy; an' don't go to nosin' out trouble that don't come to ye without seekin'."

But Charley persisted, obstinately:

"I—propose—to follow him—up—let what will come of it!"

"Wait tell ye've had yer breakfast."

"At once!"

"Ye're boun' to go?"

"Absolutely."

And the youth seized his rifle, and looked carefully to its loading.

"Then ye don't go alone," declared Honest Jack, and caught up his own rifle, ready to accompany his boy against foes natural or supernatural.

But Charley objected:

"Oh, no, Jack! I'm not going to draw you into this thing."

"Whar you go, I go."

"But I decline to be kept in leading strings. I'm old enough to go on my own hook."

"Alone, boy! What could you do ag'in' sich a doxolger? Why, he could break ye in two!"

"If he got hold of me—which I don't propose to let him do. No!—firearms make all men equal, so far as strength goes. If he is quicker than I am I want to know it."

"Boy, ye're sot ag'in' my goin'?"

"Yes."

"Waal, may the Lord go with ye. Jack Mowbray's done his best."

"That's all right, old man. Take care of yourself till I get back. Have a hot breakfast ready. Maybe I'll have something to say about the mystery of the haunted cave!"

And wringing his "pardner's" hand, he set out with a bright, brave smile on the trail leading—to what?

The wind was still drifting the snow, so that in places the trail was being rapidly hidden, besides the annoyance of having it driven into his face with blinding force, the trail leading for the most part into the wind's eye.

His last look back at the camp discovered Jack gazing after him wistfully. He waved his hand, and then, turning, "buckled down to his work."

When he was out of sight, Jack turned with sudden animation.

"I reckon the time has come fur it," he muttered. "Thar won't never be no call wuss'n the boy's life, an' he's a goner, sure, ef it don't save him."

Quickly and deftly he drew the charge from his rifle, and swabbed it with the nicest care. Then, loosening his jerkin, he drew forth from some inner receptacle a small packet. Removing several folds of paper, he came to an inner covering of oiled silk, cemented along its seams with wax, so as to make it impervious to moisture. Ripping this with his knife, he came to more paper, which proved to contain a charge of powder, a single cap, and a bullet, with a little patch of linen cloth.

The bullet was of silver!

Then with a solemnity which left no doubt as to his perfect faith, he went through a superstitious rite little in keeping with our boasted age of enlightenment.

"In the name of the Father—"

He poured in the powder, careful not to spill a single grain.

"Son—"

He rammed the bullet home.

"And Holy Ghost—"

He pressed the cap upon the nipple.

"Amen!"

This done, he set forth on the double trail.

CHAPTER IV.

THE BEAUTIFUL RECLUSE.

At the outset Charley had to flounder through drifts hip-deep; but even worse fortune awaited him, for it soon began to snow so heavily that the trail was wholly filled up.

An especially exasperating thought was that Honest Jack would believe that the dwarf had brought about the snow by supernatural means to cover his retreat.

To cap the climax, in retracing his steps, Charley reached a point where his own trail was no longer distinguishable.

Then came a pause of startled apprehension, and after a moment he owned to himself that he had lost his bearings, and had not the remotest idea in what direction the lean-to lay. All landmarks were veiled by falling flakes.

"By Jove! I believe I'm lost!" he cried.

"That's pleasant! And the confounded thing may not let up for hours—perhaps not before nightfall! Well, there's nothing for it but to wait. It is an equal chance that I will go further away from my supper, if I tramp around at random. And I was fool enough to set out on an empty stomach!"

But that was not all. The temperature began to fall, and he was compelled to keep moving, or freeze.

Hours passed, bringing the short day to its close.

Faint from want of food, exhausted by the muscular strain of floundering through the drifts, he staggered like a drunken man, his face the picture of utter, hopeless misery.

He felt that he was growing benumbed. The torpor of his blood got into his brain.

"Is this the end?" he asked, gazing blankly into the gathering darkness, and he felt indifferent to the issue.

But then came the thought:

"It was Jack's prophecy—I should be led to my destruction. And the sum of my earthly existence is to lend color to a stupid superstition! By Heaven, I won't have that! Help! help! HELP!"

But this was only a cry of despair. He had

no hope of summoning aid out of that wilderness. Staggering a few steps further, he plunged headlong into a drift, and so lay, while the great, featherlike flakes hurried to bury him from sight.

But, as the French say, "there is nothing so probable as the impossible." His purposeless cry reached a pair of human ears, and set a human heart to beating high and warm with human sympathy.

A form, scarcely more than two-thirds his own in bulk, appeared from what looked like a dome of snow.

It was impossible, at sight, to tell the sex; for the dress of skins was nondescript. But a cry in a musical soprano, as the figure bent over the prostrate body, decided that question once for all.

Nothing but young femininity could produce such a sound; and if there was any agreement between voice and face, she could not but be as lovely as eye and heart need wish.

Seizing the youth by the shoulder, she sought to rouse him to consciousness, with such success that he responded dully to united voice and action:

"That's all right, ole man."

In his stupor he thought it was Honest Jack.

"But the girl cried:

"Get up! get up! You must not stay here. You will freeze to death."

"What's the row? Who're you?" he asked, just like a drunken man. "Yes—yes; that's all right."

He got upon his legs, with her help, and then staggered forward as she led him.

It taxed her to the utmost to keep him on his feet, and at last he fell, carrying her to the ground with him. But it was just before the door of a rude hut, into which, with strength surprising in one so slight, she succeeded in dragging him.

Her first office was to pour some fiery spirits down his throat. Then she drew off his gloves and raw-hide moccasins, to find his hands and feet stiff and white with cold, though not actually frost-bitten. These she soon made red and glowing, by rubbing them with snow.

He was still unconscious; but by his breathing she knew that he had passed directly from coma to the deep, dreamless sleep of thorough exhaustion.

She removed his fur cap, and, brushing his hair from his forehead, gazed upon him with emotions a stranger to her virgin breast.

"Ah! how beautiful he is!" she murmured.

Then a puzzled expression knit her brows.

"But where have I seen him before?—or some one like him; that must be it. I could never—no, never forget him!"

And she caught her breath, flutteringly, and pressed her hand to her bosom, while a swift blush mantled her cheek at the boldness of her thought.

A look of anxiety almost immediately followed.

"What will Cyriac say? He is so fiercely jealous of strangers. He will treat him like an interloper. But he shall not harm him! No, no! he shall not!"

Her eyes flashed with a determination which showed that she would defend the stranger with all her might.

"What can detain him?" she asked herself, now showing anxiety for the absent one. "What if he too should become lost in this fearful storm? But that cannot be. He has the instinctive sense of locality of an Indian. Still—"

She went to the door, to gaze forth into the gathering gloom.

The wind rushed in, bearing a flurry of snow, and making the flames roar more boisterously up the chimney.

She hastily drew back, and shut out the storm; then set to work preparing food for the expected one, and for him (when he should wake) who had come to her, a gift of the tempest.

But the night deepened, bringing no demand for admittance from without; and the stranger slept on unbrokenly; while the girl, robbed of appetite by suspense, saw her supper grow cold untouched.

Finally the heavy head of the watcher drooped forward on the rude table at which she sat; and she too slept.

The boy was the first to rouse. He found himself lying on a shake down of mountain moss, covered with undressed skins, in the corner of a rude hut. From the mud-daubed fireplace, a mass of glowing embers, now lying dull and red, and now shooting up flames, illuminated the room with an uncertain light. But

this was enough to reveal a vision of loveliness that made his heart leap as never before.

"The Sleeping Beauty!" he whispered, fearful of moving lest he wake her.

Her face, resting on the side, was turned toward him. From the fair, low brow swept masses of gold-blond hair, streaming over her shoulders unconfined, just as she had tossed it back from her temples with an impatient gesture that he could well imagine. The fringes of curved lashes rested against cheeks aglow with health in rosy sleep, not pale, like those of his young-lady sisters, but bronzed by exposure to the free mountain air and sunshine; yet inexpressibly lovely. Perhaps that made the red of her pulpy lips all the richer.

"Ah! what delight to kiss them!"

He was already bold enough to plan such a foray!

Carefully he rose to a sitting posture, and so came to discover the untasted supper.

"By Jove! that has a welcome look!"

And though his joints ached and his head swam with the effort, while his hands and feet felt like muffs, he managed to get up and cross to the fire-place without disturbing the pretty sleeper.

He ate ravenously, until forced to give over with a sigh of fullness.

Then he turned, to find the girl awake and gazing at him with laughing blue eyes, evidently enjoying his relish for her cooking.

"My charming hostess," he said, for the phrase of compliment came as readily to his tongue as if he had kissed the Blarney stone, "it is the treason of my stomach, if I have proved so ungallant as to turn from your beauty to anything so unromantic as broiled venison. But then, I did not forget—believe me—that your fair hands had prepared it."

"Did it taste good?" she asked, with child-like simplicity.

"Fit for the gods!"

"You seem to have brought hungry sauce to the feast."

And an amused smile at his extravagance showed her white, even teeth.

"You may well say that," assented our hero, who let no charm escape him. "A twenty-four hours' fast is a pretty good appetizer. But how did I get in here? The last thing I recollect, it seems to me, was falling flakes and gathering gloom, with a first-class prospect of taking the long snooze in a snowbank."

While the girl explained how she found him, he threw some wood on the fire, which presently blazed up, filling the hut with a flood of light.

In the midst of his account of how he came to be wandering in the storm, the girl suddenly interrupted him with the ejaculation:

"Why, that must have been Cyriac!"

"Cyriac! And who may that be?" he asked.

"He is—"

She stopped with a flush of embarrassment.

With an expression of countenance and tone of voice in which horror was blended with indignation, he cried:

"Nothing to you, surely!"

The girl bridled with quick resentment.

"Cyriac is my guardian—my father's most faithful servant and friend," she said. "I owe him everything. You have misjudged him. If he was harsh to you, it was only because he is afraid of all strangers, on my account. You must forego your hostility at once. Promise me that you will exhibit no unfriendliness toward him when he comes."

"That monster your guardian!" cried Charley, breathlessly, having heeded nothing that she said after this revelation.

"Hush! You shall not speak so of him," cried the girl, springing to her feet, to stand with flashing eyes, pale cheeks and quivering lips, her hands clinched, and her little figure drawn erect with anger. "Is not his misfortune hard enough to bear without your ungenerous contempt? You cannot be my friend, and treat him so."

"But, your guardian!" cried Charley.

"To be near you, perhaps to touch you!—laugh!"

And he shuddered with a sense of horror at the thought.

"Yes!" cried the girl, with loyal heat, "to carry me in his arms, when I was a wee thing unable to help myself. But for him, I might have been smothered and thrown into the river, or perhaps been given to the Gypsies, like— Oh, I forgot! I wasn't to tell anybody."

She checked herself with sudden fright, as if in her impulsive defense of the dwarf she had betrayed some secret.

"What is all this?" asked Charley, with a

quick suspicion that he had stumbled upon some strange mystery. Strange indeed must be the tie that could bind this vision of loveliness to that monster of ugliness.

"Don't ask me," said the girl. "I must not tell you."

But her truthful face showed that her heart was not in the duty; so, thinking her the most unsophisticated young lady he had ever met, Charley said, with the air of one who had cause for complaint:

"So you have begun to distrust me already!"

"Oh, no indeed!" cried she, impulsively. "But— You were not sent by my wicked uncle; were you?"

"Far from it. I have never even so much as seen him," was our hero's assurance.

"I knew it!" she ejaculated. "And—and— You will never betray me? Oh, I'm sure you won't!"

"Do I look like it?"

"No. Well, you must know that my parents died when I was a baby—or almost. I can just remember my sweet-faced mamma, and, oh, such a beautiful home! I was an heiress, Cyriac says; and my wicked, wicked uncle wanted to get the estate, just like Bettina's uncle. Cyriac found out that he was going to have me carried off and killed by some terrible men; so he ran away with me, as little Bettina's nurse did, and saved my life. When I am of age, we are going back; and the judge will give me my property, and not let my wicked uncle touch me. But if he finds me before then, he can claim me, and do anything he pleases with me. So we are hiding out here in the mountains, until I grow up to be a woman."

"Now you know why Cyriac was so cross with you. He was afraid that you might be some one sent by my uncle in search of me. Aren't you ashamed of speaking as you did of one who has been so kind to me? He taught me how to read, and everything; and I have read about Bettina over and over again, until I know it almost all by heart. Do you know Bettina?"

"Bettina?" repeated our hero, looking the amazement with which he had listened to this remarkable story, told with an air of perfect simplicity, as if its incidents were the most ordinary in life.

"Just wait a minute and I'll show you," said the girl, and plunging through a low doorway curtained by a bear-skin, she quickly reappeared with a thumb-worn, paper-covered book in her hand.

It proved to be a novel.

"And do you suppose that it is true?" cried Charley.

"True?" repeated the girl, not comprehending him.

"That Bettina was a person who actually lived?" he explained.

"Why, of course she lived. She is alive now. Only she was a grown woman when I was a little girl. It tells all about it at the end of the book. And Cyriac saw her once."

"He told you all this?"

"To be sure."

"How old are you?"

"Fifteen."

But her appearance indicated that she was full three years older than she supposed.

"How long have you lived here in the mountains?"

"Oh, all my life. Ever since we escaped from my wicked uncle. For ever and ever so long, there were only Indians anywhere about. The first white man I saw I was sure it must be my uncle. That was two years ago."

"And you have never told this story to any one before?"

"Oh dear, no! I have always been afraid to speak to any one, or even let myself be seen. Only you looked so—so like the noble youth that—that saved Bettina, when her uncle found her out and locked her up in that horrible deserted house—"

And here her stammering speech came to an end, while her cheeks glowed rosy red with maiden confusion; for she was thinking how Bettina's rescuer had made love to her, and wondering whether our hero was destined to play the same role.

While listening, Charley had been idly running over the leaves of the book. Suddenly his eye was arrested by a name written on the title-page. From it his glance flashed back to the face of the girl before him, and all the color faded from his cheeks.

"What is this?" he asked in strained tones.

"That is my name. Cyriac taught me to write also."

"Eveline! Good heavens! if it should prove—"

"Why, what's the matter?" cried the girl, in

alarm, as he rose to his feet, choked by the emotion that swelled in his breast.

But before he could reply, he heard the door open at his back, and saw Eveline look beyond him and spring to her feet with a shriek of terror.

Her agonized face seemed to burst into a million stars, that filled the room with dazzling light for an instant, and then—oblivion!

He did not see the blow that felled him.

CHAPTER V.

THE SILVER BULLET SHOT HOME.

HONEST JACK, like his boy, was baffled by the snow, and only his wonderful mountain craft enabled him to find his way back to camp.

All night he kept the fire blazing high, and discharged his revolvers at intervals, on the chance that the light or the reports might guide the wanderer back.

Not that he had any hope. He sat bowed in gloom, gazing into the fire.

Toward morning a marked change of temperature turned the snow-storm into a warm rain, which rapidly melted the drifts, and set the canyon to thundering with the rush of torrents.

Still without hope, Jack set forth, to trace every glen and climb every hill, discharging his revolvers and hallooing at the top of his voice as he went.

Night saw him standing dejected beside the wet ashes of his dead camp-fire.

He moved toward the dark and desolate lean-to, for the means of rekindling the blaze.

An incredulous cry escaped him. He stopped abruptly, rubbed his eyes, and looked again.

Then he sprung forward and knelt beside a dimly-outlined form; and the wilderness rung afar with a terrible cry of strangely blended emotions.

He plucked the body up from the ground, and hugged it to his breast, crying—

"Boy! boy! speak to me! Thank God, I've got ye back again! But how?—oh God, how? Dead?—dead? No, no! the good Lord, the which I've tried to sarve him on the squar' as fur as it lay in a pore mortal born in sin, wouldn't be so hard!"

It was indeed Charley, returned in some mysterious way to the lean-to. And he was yet alive; for, roused by Honest Jack's wild appeal, he began to mumble incoherently.

For a time Jack was nearly beside himself. That his boy was restored to him alive was enough joy for the present.

Propping him in a sitting posture against one side of the lean-to, he said:—

"Set thar, boy, till I git a fire started. Glory be to God! we'll have ye round an' squar' on yer pins ag'in in two shakes of a lamb's tail!"

He had a store of touch-wood protected from the weather for such a time as this, and so was able soon to have a fire roaring before the lean-to, restoring its wonted cosiness.

Then he prepared a febrifuge decoction from herbs resorted to in such cases by the Indians, and about midnight had the satisfaction of seeing his patient fall into a deep sleep.

The next day Charley was himself once more, except that he was so weak as to be hardly able to lift his head.

"Jack! Jack!" he called.

"Thank God, boy, you've struck the straight trail again!" cried Honest Jack, coming to his side.

"But what's the matter with me? I'm limp as— Ah! now I remember!"

A quick flush appeared in his cheeks, and a flash of excitement in his eyes, as he struggled to his elbow. But his head swam, and he sunk back exhausted.

"Jack!" he cried, "you must save her; I'm good for nothing—just now when I'd give my life for strength to rescue her!"

"Hush, boy! hush!" urged Jack, who thought this a renewed aberration.

But Charley persisted:

"Jack, I've found my cousin—as beautiful a creature as eye ever rested on—in the keeping of that devil! We must save her, old man—you must save her. Oh! I could tear my heart out, for being tied here!"

Honest Jack shook his head sadly.

"Boy," he said, "try not to take on in that way."

"Why, Jack, do you think I'm mad?"

"It's the doin's o' the Evil One," said Jack, mournfully. "Ef so be ye'd jest—"

"Hold on, Jack. This is too much. As long as your obstinate superstition only affected me, it was endurable. But now the life happiness of an innocent girl depends on your listening to reason. You must be reasonable! Oh,

Jack! if you saw a woman that I love better than my own life held in captivity and kept almost like a savage—kept in ignorance of her very name and parentage by that fiendish ghoul, wouldn't you try to save her!—for my sake, Jack!"

"God knows, boy, I'd give the heart out o' my body to sarve ye!"

"Then listen."

And Charley told his adventure circumstantially.

"The moment I saw her face," he said, in conclusion, "I felt that it was strangely familiar; and when I read her name—my own mother's name—I knew who it was she resembled. Her association with the dwarf fixed her identity beyond question."

"An infant daughter of my mother's brother was lost overboard from a Hudson river ferry-boat—at first it was supposed by accident; but later discoveries led to the suspicion that it was an act of revenge, on the part of a dwarf who had been discharged from my uncle's employ because of his wife's nervous repugnance toward him."

"The bodies were never recovered; yet no one seems to have suspected that they might have escaped drowning. But here they are. She has grown up in the wilderness, knowing absolutely nothing of the world; so he has been able to keep her a willing captive by practicing a most outrageous fraud on her ignorance. She actually believes herself bound to him by claims of gratitude."

"Now I have no idea where the hut is, but you must scour the whole country till you find it."

"Boy," said Honest Jack, who had listened as we listen to the ravings of one insane, "how long have we camped in these byar parts?"

"Two months or thereabouts."

"Ain't it cur'ls we've never run onto no hut like what—"

"But that's no reason we shouldn't, now that we know there's one to find."

Jack sighed and tried again.

"How did you git back to the lean to d'ye s'pose?"

"I don't know," admitted Charley, frankly.

"Now s'posin'—jest s'posin'," said Jack, feeling his way cautiously, "the hut an' that thar barn'some crittur was all smoke?"

"That I imagined them?"

"That they was only a crinkle in yer top-knot, while ye was wanderin' around in the storm—jest s'posin', ye know."

"And that I found my way back here in a state of delirium?"

"Ye reel it off to beat me; but that's my idee, exactly."

Here was a way of accounting for what otherwise seemed inexplicable. If the dwarf had really attacked him, how had he got back to the lean-to?

Charley's head was so dizzy that he could not meet Jack's argument; but he persisted, almost pathetically:

"Jack, whether it seems reasonable to you or not, promise to do as I ask you. Go and look for the hut—go at once!"

"Waal, boy, it's jest as you say."

And Jack shouldered his rifle, and set off without delay.

He did not return until night, his dejected look sufficient proof of his want of success.

"To-morrow I shall try," was all that Charley said.

And on the morrow he made good his word.

But day after day of exhausting labor among the crags passed without result, until it seemed as if he had scoured every inch of ground within a radius of twenty miles.

He had alternate fits of impatient rage and deep melancholy, and grew thin and pale, until the merry Charley of old was hardly recognizable.

Jack humored him in everything. While he made a show of aiding in the search, his real object was to watch his boy.

But one day he held back.

"Not that way—not that thar way!" he urged, with an unwonted pallor of cheek and foreboding in his eyes.

"And why not that way?" asked Charley, with the instant resistance of unreasoning suspicion.

"That leads to the run what I told ye about, whar Joe passed in his checks."

"Well, what of that? I've had enough of this nonsense. If you do not choose to follow, I will go alone."

"There'll harm come of it, boy."

"Harm or not, here goes."

"Wait!—wait!"

"I've waited too much already."

"One word. We've been follered."

"By whom?"

"By that shorty."

"What! You have seen him? You did not let me know? By heaven! I believe you're in league with him against me!"

"Boy, ye don't mean that. Ye ain't yerself."

"Speak!—speak! Where did you see him, and when?"

"I seen his trail."

"And did not call my attention to it! We might have trailed him down at once!"

"We tried that. No—he'd fotch us ag'in, somehow."

"And we are to let such an opportunity to discover her whereabouts slip through our fingers?"

"Ef we kin keep shut o' that thar ornery critter, I allow it'll be bacon in our larder."

Charley was now choking with rage. He saw that Jack had been acting for what he thought was his boy's best good.

"You traitor!" he ground between his teeth. "God help me! I've a mind to give you your just deserts!"

And in his blind fury he actually threw the muzzle of his rifle forward, with a meaning that could not be mistaken.

Jack never moved, nor did he show a trace of fear; but into his eyes came a look of such profound sorrow as a father might feel, at having his cherished son smite him in the face.

"Boy," he said in tremulous tones, "sparer yerself the remorse o' lookin' back on the time when ye lifted yer hand ag'in the pard that 'ud give his life fur ye, any day. The devil's victory will be complete, ef he brings that on ye. Then he'll leave ye to live ontel ye're old, an' every day an' all day he'll remind ye on 't."

The look and tone, more than the words recalled Charley to his senses.

"But, oh, Jack!" he cried, "you are doing me harm when you are trying to do me the most good. Be guided by me! You don't think I would really injure you, Jack?"

"No, boy—not ef you were yerself."

He heartily returned the grip with which Charley wrung his hand, and so peace was restored between them.

"And now every moment counts."

"Lead on, boy; lead on."

They went along one of nature's wildest paths.

Presently Charley heard the roar of the torrent. A little further, and he saw a cleft in the rock, with black, foam-dappled water at the bottom.

Gaping not more than a dozen feet, it seemed as if the rock had been split asunder, so sheer and smooth were its walls. It was fifty feet to the water, and of unknown depth after that. The swift, unbroken current betokened a comparatively free channel.

Even as Charley paused a moment to gaze at it, with a sort of fascination, the fall of a pebble a few steps further up the pass caused him to look up.

And there in full view, having just come round an angle of rock, stood Cyriac, the Dwarf!—stood like some hideous Pagan idol, carven in stone, the impersonation of ugliness and malignity.

For one breathless instant three pairs of eyes crossed fire.

Then Honest Jack's rifle, charged with the silver bullet before which magic was of no effect, leaped to his shoulder, and his true eye ranged along the barrel, bringing the sights into line with the center of the dwarf's forehead.

Once more, acting from his own point of view, he was making a fatal mistake. To him, to break the charm was to solve all of their difficulties. To Charley, the death of the dwarf now meant the loss of the only clue to his prisoner's whereabouts.

To stay this calamity, the youth leaped, with a warning cry, to knock up the deadly rifle.

But too late! A ringing report, a puff of white smoke, and with a snarling yell, like that of a wild beast, the dwarf dropped from view.

"Whoop! Ha! ha! ha! ha! Hooray!" shouted Honest Jack, so wild with delight at the success of his shot that he tossed his cap high in the air.

"My God! what have you done?" cried Charley, in dismay.

"Saved ye!—saved ye, my boy! An' I thank the Lord he give it to me to do it!" responded Jack, seizing upon his hand, as if it were an occasion for mutual congratulations.

But Charley tore himself free and ran forward

holding his own rifle in readiness, if perchance the dwarf were only wounded, and might try to send a shot in return.

What was his astonishment to find that the man he sought was nowhere visible?

"Why, where has he gone?" he cried. "This is the very spot he stood on; and he has had no chance to escape."

"Gone!" repeated Honest Jack, with a well-satisfied air. "Whar should he go but down into the ground? D'ye think them kind leaves their carcasses layin' around for the coyotes an' buzzards, like human folks? *Waal*, they don't!"

But Charley, seeing the only way by which the dwarf could have got out of sight so quickly, had leaped to the brink of the cleft, not three yards distant, and now uttered a cry which betokened a discovery.

Jack sprung to his side, and saw on the swiftly-gliding tide the circling waves which showed where a heavy body had just plunged beneath the surface.

"He rolled over the verge!" cried Charley. "Look—look! There he rises! *Good Heavens!*"

The last was a cry of horror; for the dwarf had come to view in the midst of the whirlpool, where the waters sunk into the earth.

Once he made the circuit of the little basin with lightning velocity. As he struck the incoming current, he tossed his arms above his head with a yell of savage hatred and defiance, and was sucked under.

With a shudder, Charley averted his gaze. In that moment he remembered the humanity of the being—albeit deformed in spirit as in body—who had gone to a nameless fate.

Jack was struck with awe. It was the second man he had seen go down through that mysterious gateway to death. But to him it seemed perfectly fit.

"He's gone home!" he said, solemnly. "Thank the good Lord it was before he took you in, like he did pore Joe! But, boy, that thar was a *silver bullet* what fetched him. This hyar's the last ye'll see ur hyar tell o' the Demon o' the Cavern, ye onderstand. No more spook business; no more onnatral snow-storms; no more sperrit gals, and sich! An' now we'll go back to the good ole times;—stick to the lean-to, an' leave ha'nted caves fur them as has use fur 'em. We're off fur this time; an' they ain't ketchin' these hyar birds twie't with chaff. Eh, pardner?"

And Honest Jack wrung his boy's hand, gazing at him lovingly and expectantly, as if to see him restored at once to his old self, by the lifting of the spell.

But instead, Charley groaned:

"How now shall we ever find my cousin?"

"The which?" asked Jack, his face suddenly becoming blank.

"Oh, Jack! this was all a mistake! We should have trailed him to his hiding-place, or have captured him and wrung the secret from him, by fire, if necessary. Now, what are we to do? Where shall we look to find her?"

"Thar it is ag'in!" sighed Honest Jack, gazing at his boy with hopeless concern.

"There is what?"

"The gal-spook. I thought we was done with that sort o' thing."

"My cousin? Are you crazy? We must find her whether he is dead or alive."

Deeper gloom than ever settled down over Honest Jack's face.

"I must 'a' missed him!" he groaned; an' I'd druther 'a' piled a pound ur two o' lead into my own in'ards!"

He stood bowed with despondency, gazing at the swirling pool.

"Jack," said Charley, "there is but one place left."

"Whar's that?" asked Jack, mechanically.

"The cave. The mystery of our return to the lean-to remains unexplained, unless we account for both in the same way. The dwarf must have carried me from the hut to the lean-to while I was unconscious. Then why may be not have carried both of us and our traps back from the cave?"

"In our sleep!" interposed Jack, incredulously.

"In our sleep!" insisted Charley. "We both slept heavily, you know."

"As we mostly always do!"

Charley ignored this sarcasm.

"Then he tried to drive us out of the neighborhood. Why? Because we had discovered the cave; and he had some reason for wishing to keep us out of it. Jack, I propose to find out what that reason was; and in doing so, I believe that I shall find my cousin as well!"

"An' the but we've been lookin' fur!—an' hain't found yit!"

Charley made no attempt to answer that objection, but shouldered his rifle and walked off.

Honest Jack followed submissively.

"Go whar ye will," he said, "ye don't go alone. Jack Mowbray's done his best to hender ye; but ef ye will go, then he goes along, ef we have to wade through burnin' brimstun up to our necks!"

"Jack, you believe that I would not lead you into danger that human beings were not fit to meet, as brave men meet the ordinary perils of life?"

"Not ef you was yerself, boy. I do believe that."

"Thank you. Let the issue prove which is mistaken."

That day they made preparations for a thorough exploration of the cave. The next, they entered—how and when to come forth!

CHAPTER VI.

LOST UNDERGROUND!

THE preparations of the hunters for exploring the cave consisted in getting pine knots for torches, and, at Jack's suggestion, taking with them food and water, so that they might be ready for any mischance.

"And we must have some clew to our wanderings," said Charley, "for we shall get lost in the labyrinth of galleries. Besides, we must always be able to distinguish the passages already traversed from those awaiting exploration, so that none shall be overlooked, and none gone over needlessly a second time."

"Ef we had some chalk now," suggested Jack, "we could keep tally o' them that we ranged through. Hold on! I know whar thar's a whitish rock that'll make a mark—like a book!"

"That's just what we want," said Charley.

Jack soon fetched a piece of calcareous formation enough like chalk for their purpose.

"Now, for a regular order of exploration, and a system of marks," said Charley; "for it will be a waste of time to do the thing at random. As the way out is of primary importance, we will put an arrow-head at the opening through which we first enter each chamber, and at the point where any gallery branches. The order of exploration shall be to the left; and as we enter a passage, we will mark its mouth with a circle. Returning, after having traced a passage and what it leads to, we will cross out the circle, so that it need not be entered again. Add to this the numbering of each chamber, and we shall know where we are, and what we have accomplished at any moment."

"Boy," said Jack, admiringly, "a head-piece fur layin' out work is half the battle."

Aglow with enthusiasm, Charley led the way, the black smoke from his torch smudging the low roof of the corridor above his head.

Jack followed, more anxious, more on the alert, his troubled eye striving to pierce the gloom ahead.

"Go slow, boy," he cautioned. "Thar's no calculatin' what ye may run ag'in'."

"Don't fret, old man. I'm prepared for whatever we stir up."

And Charley gripped more resolutely the cocked revolver he carried in his hand.

The first chamber they found as they had left it; and having duly marked the exit with an arrow-head—three lines radiating from a point so as to form an acute angle; a character in common use among shippers—and added the figure "1" as the number of the chamber, they marked it with a circle and then entered the first corridor to the left, as prearranged.

But it is unnecessary to trace their course step by step. The mountain was honeycombed; and they would soon have become hopelessly confused, but for Charley's system of marks.

On every hand they met with new wonders, formed by water filtering through the rock until it became impregnated with bicarbonate of lime. Now they walked over what looked like a frozen rapid, now stood before a cataract or fountain of glass, now trod the echoing aisles of a crystalline temple. But nowhere did they see any trace of life—any evidence that the cavern had been penetrated by any human being before them.

The effect on the friends was different. Jack met Charley's enthusiasm with but one formula:

"It don't belong to to this hyar world, an' ain't no good fur mortal eyes to see."

They had no measure of the flight of time save their stomachs and the sense of weariness.

But they proved false guides, for the reason that they did not take into account the power of absorbing interest to divert the attention from these monitors of nature.

Jack was the first to propose that they turn back, and seek rest and food.

"By Jove!" cried Charley, "I believe I am hungry, and dead beat in the bargain. Who would have believed that one could keep going till he got so entirely played out, without knowing it?"

He hunted for a crevice into which to stick his torch, and then sat down wearily, propping his back against the wall.

"This is as good a lunch-room as we need; and what's the use in going back to the first chamber to sleep? Bless you, old man! I could sleep like a top in Purgatory, for one night."

"Boy, I didn't allow to put in no more nights under ground, not to say in a place like this hyar. Thar's some things, the which one is a cart-load."

"We'll talk it over after we've got outside of our regular rations, Jack," said Charley, his mouth already crammed.

When he was forced to stop with a sigh of fullness, he said:

"Now look here, Jack. This is chamber number seven. Two and five have been thoroughly explored. We have therefore one, three, four, six and seven in a chain. Do you know what the corridors joining these chambers would foot up at? A good long mile, if an inch. And what is to be gained by tramping that distance, tired as we are? Nothing. Here we have a bed-chamber dry and free from draughts; and if we can find a sandy spot to lie on, we shall have every comfort heart could wish. Here we are—just the— Good heavens! Jack! Jack! look here!"

And Charley stopped abruptly, pointing excitedly at the floor of the cavern.

Looking, Jack saw a single footprint in a sandy spot.

"See!" cried Charley, "it is small. No man could have made that."

"A squaw might," said Jack. "It is a moccasin print."

"But she wears moccasins!"

"Boy, let us git out o' this. It's a decoy, to keep ye hyar this night."

"Jack, that track was made by none other than my cousin; and I shall sleep with my head on it. This is proof that we are on the right track. If the dwarf were alive I would not waste a minute; but with him dead, I can wait."

And the youth stretched himself on his back, with a yawn.

"Our torches won't more'n burn through the night," objected Jack.

"Blow them out, and have what is left to start to-morrow with."

"Stay hyar in the dark!"

"Are you a child, to be afraid of the dark?"

"I ain't afeard o' nothin' that's accordin' to natur'."

"Well, so far we have seen nothing in any way contrary to nature. Good-night, old man."

And laughingly Charley closed the argument by shutting his eyes.

Jack, as usual, yielded.

They slept, knowing nothing of what went on about them in that mysterious cavern while they lay unconscious.

They woke.

Nothing unusual seemed to have happened; but Charley yawned, declaring:

"By Jove! I feel as if I should like to roll over and take another forty winks before turning out for all day."

"Boy," said Jack, "thar's the same feelin' in my head that thar was the first night we slep' in hyar."

"Nonsense!"

Then came the click of flint and steel, and Charley was soon blowing some mushroom tinder into a flame.

After breakfast, they set forth to retrace their steps to the outer world; but as they went Charley began to look puzzled.

"Why, Jack, this don't look right, does it?"

"It surely has a queer look," admitted Jack.

"And yet here is the number all right."

And Charley pointed to number four beside the arrow-head.

"I thought that number six looked strange," he went on, "and the passages seemed longer."

"Perhaps it's because we come into 'em from another side," suggested Jack. "A trail is always different, lookin' back."

They went on.

Number three had an unfamiliar look, and

number one was beyond all question not the chamber in which they had slept on their first visit to the cave.

"There can be no mistake about the marks," said Charley, beginning to feel anxious. "See, here is the arrow-head and the figure '1' beside it."

"Boy," said Jack, solemnly, "d'ye know what this hyar is?"

"What what is?"

"The queer look o' things."

"Why, I suppose we have forgotten just how the chambers looked, seeing so many."

"No, no; it ain't that."

"What is it, then?"

"It's magic—that's what it is!"

"Nonsense!"

"Ef so be Jack Mowbray's a fool, then this way leads out. Let's try it."

They entered the passage.

Instead of leading to the outer world, it took them into another chamber, at the openings from which there were no marks.

"Why, we've got turned round," said Charley. "We have mistaken the marks and gone the wrong way."

"Didn't we always take the passages marked with an arrow?"

"Yes, we must have done so. And yet how could it lead us into this strange chamber?"

"Let's go back the way we come," suggested Jack.

But now arose the question:—Which way had they come?

On entering this chamber, they had not observed that there was no circle beside the mouth of the passage through which they came, and in the anxious search for other marks they had gone round and round, until neither had any idea which to choose.

"Well," said Charley, "there are nine passages leading from this chamber. We have but to follow each in turn to find the mark that is surely at the end of one of them—the one by which we entered. Once more on the right track, we can be more careful."

Jack made no comment.

They began, Charley showing some signs of nervous haste.

Corridor after corridor was tried. Finding no mark at the further end, they returned and took the next, with the same result.

Finally Charley said:

"We surely must have tried them all."

He looked to see how many of the nine had been checked off. To his surprise he found that none of them showed any trace of marking.

"Why, the marks are being rubbed off as fast as we put them on!" he cried.

"That's no discount on that," said Jack, stolidly.

"But if that is so, it is the work of men; and it is for us to catch them at the mischief."

"Boy, them kind o' men ain't bein' ketched. This was no time to argue."

"We must trace our way back by recollection," said Charley. "The general appearance of the chambers must direct us."

"An' it must do it quick, ef it's to do it at all," said Jack. "Our torches won't last forever."

Charley looked. Two partially burnt, and one untouched as yet. He turned pale at the prospect of being lost in that labyrinth in the dark.

"Let us put one out," he said.

It was done.

Then began a search on the issue of which both felt that their lives depended.

Jack had no hope whatever of success. He believed that their fate had overtaken them. The dwarf was revenged.

Charley tried to shut his eyes to the dire possibility. But a panic such as he had never felt was now struggling for the mastery of his reason.

He became nervous and excited. The very importance of his decisions, in any one of which a mistake might prove fatal, made him uncertain. He appealed to Jack constantly; but the moment the latter expressed an opinion contrary to his own, he argued his views until Jack yielded.

And Jack, believing that it was all one whether they went this way or that, was even more ready to yield than usual.

So they proceeded, with ever-increasing haste, as the next to the last torch was lighted and burnt out.

Then their last torch threw its red glare around; and Charley felt that he was wholly unable to decide between the chambers which seemed to be multiplying in endless succession, and looking more and more alike.

"Jack," he said, "we are lost beyond question. My God! when that torch is gone!"

Jack's only reply was:

"We'll gain nothin' by losin' time. I allow that's nothin' fur it but to keep tryin'."

They did keep trying until their torch was at its last flickers. Then Charley suddenly cried:

"Look, Jack, look!"

And with the quickness of lightning he lifted his rifle and fired.

The report sounded like a clap of sharp thunder in that cramped space.

Jack saw several shadows flit across the further end of the chamber in which they stood, but they were gone before he could make out any forms.

At the same time something brushed close to his face, fanning him with a cold wind.

He shuddered.

Charley had run off to see the effect of his shot.

"There is nothing here!" he called back.

"O' course not," replied Jack.

He was gazing over his head. Great shadows seemed flitting about the cavern in every direction.

At that moment he felt a slight shock, as if something striking his remnant of a torch, and the light was suddenly put out.

"Jack—Jack!" called Charley, in frightened tones.

"Here I am, boy!"

He heard Charley groping his way toward him.

Soon they joined each other, and clasped hands in the darkness.

CHAPTER VII.

GOLGOTHA.

"THIS is the end of it all, Jack?" asked Charley, in a strangely-hushed voice.

"I reckon so, boy."

"If we could not find our way out with a light, it is hopeless now."

"I don't see nothin' ag'in' that."

"And I led you into this, Jack, with my obstinate persistence. I'll never forgive myself—never!"

"Don't say jest nothin' at all about that, boy. It's all right. Ye done what ye thought was fur the best. I know it wa'n't you yerself. No man ain't accountable when the devil gits after him. The best of us don't stan' no show buckin' ag'in' him."

"Jack, that's the worst of it—that you should still believe that this is through supernatural agency. I tell you it is a man or men that have overmatched us."

"Waal, I allow it won't make much matter what we call it. Hyar we be—an' to stay till the Judgment Day, I reckon."

"Jack, we must not give up the effort to find our way out. Accident may favor us. Come, let's keep moving while we have strength."

"All right, boy. Lead wherever ye want to go."

Then they began to grope their way in that hopeless quest.

How long they continued thus, neither ever knew. At last Charley uttered a sharp cry.

"Look, Jack, look!"

He thrust out his arm in the darkness, though of course Jack could not see which way he pointed.

But Jack's eye also was caught by what had arrested his companion's attention. It was a faint, grayish-blue glare, of such odd character that they could not guess how far away it might be.

"That is daylight!" cried Charley, wildly.

"Boy, boy! wait—wait!"

For Charley would have broken away, and rushed off toward the expected deliverance.

"Wait? For what? We are saved! We have but to keep our eye on that light. That is the bright earth—the cloudless sky—the warm sunshine!"

"Boy, that's the death-light!"

"The death-light?"

"Don't ye see? It's blue!"

"No, it is gray. It is a faint light on some stalactite."

"I've seen the like o' that lead men into quagmires that hadn't nary bottom to 'em. Don't go that way. Ye'll walk straight into a pitfall o' some kind."

"Nonsense, Jack! Must we see deliverance, and then be held back by a foolish superstition?"

"How did we get into this fix? By goin' contrary to Jack Mowbray's foolish superstitions! Book-larnin' is good for some things—I don't

deny that; but I reckon as they don't have all the savy o' the world between covers, by a few. Seein's believin'; an' men has been seein' the things ye call foolish superstition ever sence Adam was a boy. How did we git into this fix, I say? By goin' ag'in' my advice every time."

"But this, Jack—this surely is daylight! I admit that everything seems to favor your theory; and yet you may be mistaken, after all."

Jack sighed.

"Ye're sot to do it," he said, despondently. "It ain't in the power o' mortal man to go hither when the old 'un pushes him yon! I don't blame ye—what is to be, will be!"

Charley, who felt that he must save Jack even against his will, drew him forward without further argument.

But, instead of coming out into the daylight, they stood in the presence of a spectacle well calculated to shake nerves so severely tried as theirs had been.

Charley could not repress a shudder of icy dread. Jack, prepared for the worst, seemed unmoved.

They had entered a chamber about the walls of which were ranged a multitude of grinning skulls, giving forth from mouth, nose and eye-sockets a pale, phosphorescent glare.

"This hyar's yer daylight," said Jack.

Charley stared, speechless with horror.

But the youth's character had a thorough grounding in common sense, and though the strain on his nerves handicapped him in the struggle against that latent superstition which we all share in some degree, he soon recovered.

"Jack," he said, "there is nothing to fear here. We have only stumbled into an old Indian burial place."

"Only a buryin'-ground!" repeated Jack, as if to admit that theory would not much better the case.

"But dead bones cannot hurt us," urged Charley.

"Dead bones don't look at ye in that way."

"Why, that is only a phosphorescent mold in the skulls."

"I allow that's as good a way to put it as any. Them as has book-larnin' has a word ready for ye ary way ye kin arguify. But when did ye ever see Injuns cuttin' the heads off o' their dead, an' settin' 'em around in that way, like chany cups on a dresser?"

"Nothing is more common in Europe. The catacombs of Rome, and Paris and other old cities have thousands upon thousands of such skulls."

"I don't know nothin' about catty-combs, nur doggy-combs, nur bossy-combs; but this hyar I do know:—we ain't in Europe now; an' no Injun never sarved his dead folks this hyar way. Harken to me while I'm a-tellin' of ye—no mortal man never put them things thar!"

"Well, a mortal man will take a couple of them down, at any rate. See here, Jack:—these are lanterns made to our hand; lanterns moreover that won't burn out. With two of these apiece, we shall have light enough to grope our way about with some little intelligence. It is one more hope for life. It was a kindly Providence that turned our steps this way."

"Boy, don't talk sich blasphemy. It wa'n't no one but the devil that sent us hyar. Stop! stop! Ye wouldn't touch one o' them cussed things?"

And he clutched Charley by the arm to hold him back.

"Oh, Jack! you put but one construction on everything. You force me to oppose you at every turn."

"They'll do ye a mischief!—they'll do ye a mischief! Come away from hyar. Better be lost and die yonder in the dark, than fool with the devil's handiwork!"

"This one thing I will prove to you, if nothing else."

And with a quick wrench Charley broke away, and running forward, snatched two of the skulls from their resting-place, though it made his flesh creep as he touched the cold, repulsive things.

"See!" he cried. "I have them, and nothing wonderful comes of it."

"Boy! boy! ye're rushin' on to yer doom!" groaned Jack.

Charley thought only of some desperate measure to convince his comrade.

"We'll see about that," he said. "Here I defy all the powers of the cave, if there be such to show by any intelligible sign their displeasure at my act!"

Promptly, as if answering to this challenge, a blood curdling groan sounded through the cav-

ern, and several skulls turned in their places, seemingly of themselves.

So shocked was our hero by this unexpected result, that he dropped the skulls he held, and shrunk back in dismay.

And Honest Jack—he who had never blanched before mortal man—now felt the blood recede from cheeks and lips, and flow in an icy current back upon his heart.

He could only groan at the rashness of the youth whose acts kept bringing down upon them greater and greater horrors.

After a moment of sickening dread Charley made one more desperate effort to rally.

"By all the fiends!" he shouted, "I will not be overcome by this hocus-pocus! Dead men's skulls cannot move without some one or something to move them, and I swear that I will find out what turned these, if I die for it!"

With courage born of desperation he leaped upon the point of a stalagmite, and reached a skull that had turned directly toward him, as if to stare out of countenance the impious defier of the underground powers.

He thought to find a string fastened to it by means of which some one in hiding could make it seem to move without aid. But it came away in his hand, with no trace of anything such as he had imagined.

"Boyl boy!" groaned Honest Jack.

"I thought I had my eye on it, but it must have been the next one," said Charley, not a little chagrined, but therefore rendered obstinate. "I'll unmask this trick, if I have to pull them all down, one by one!"

"For God's sake, give over!"

But Charley already had the next one in his hand, with the same result as before.

His failure so enraged him that he dashed the offending skull to the earth, with an oath, and leaped to seize the next.

"He's clean daft—possessed o' the devil!" cried Honest Jack.

And springing forward he caught Charley in his arms, to restrain him from further sacrilege. "Let me go!" cried the enraged youth through his set teeth, struggling wildly.

But Honest Jack's muscles were like spring steel.

"I must save ye from yerself," he said. "It's no part of a friend to give ye over to the temptin's o' the Evil One. Ye know I only go ag'in' ye fur yer own good."

But it was most galling of all to be defeated by Jack's mistaken good intentions, and Charley fought irantically for freedom.

All of a sudden Jack's arms fell away—so abruptly that Charley's rage was cooled to perfect quiet, as a dash of cold water will stop the boiling of a caldron.

He stared at Jack breathlessly, to learn the cause of his unexpected release.

Jack—brave Jack—was cowering backward, his eyes wide, his teeth chattering, his knees smiting together. He was looking over his boy's shoulder at some object of horror before which his manhood gave way utterly.

At the same time Charley heard a shuffling sound, as of some heavy body being dragged or hitched along over the floor of the cavern.

Our hero whirled round—and felt a sensation creep over his scalp as if each particular hair rose on end.

Though the amount of light given out by each skull was not great, there were so many of them that they illuminated the cavern with a ghastly, unnatural glare. Objects could be seen clear across the chamber, yet so dimly and with such unusual effect, that the eye could not with certainty tell substance from shadow, except as the former might be in motion.

This it was that drew the eye to a dark object which was coming slowly from behind one of the stalagmites.

At first it looked to Charley like some shaggy animal, injured or partially paralyzed, so that it could move only by dragging its hind quarters on the ground.

But looking closer he made out a face—unmistakably the face of the dwarf, with a bowie-knife held crosswise in his mouth!

He did not seem to notice the hunters; but his eyes were fixed straight before him, with a murderous greed in them.

His course was not toward the horrified spectators, but at right angles, across the further end of the cavern.

In that light his face was ghastly—the bluish white of a corpse.

But what froze the blood in the veins of the lookers-on was the presence of another figure unnoticed till now.

Following the direction of the dwarf's gloating gaze, they discovered what looked like a

man lying with his head on his arm, as one asleep. His face, turned toward them, was corpse-like in its unearthly pallor.

And now through the cavern sounded faint long-drawn wails and moans, that were blood-curdling in their dreary effect.

Nearer and nearer crept the dwarf. They could see him pant with the lust of blood. His victim stirred not.

And the hunters gazed as if turned to stone.

Only Honest Jack kept whispering hoarsely:

"It's Joe!—it's Joe!—it's Joe!"

Charley was paralyzed with horror. His feet were rooted to the spot where he stood. His lower limbs felt like lead. All the blood in his body seemed to be seething in his brain, pressing his eyeballs forward from their sockets.

But as the dwarf bent over his victim, and taking the knife from between his teeth, raised it above his head for the fatal plunge, the spell broke. The youth plucked his revolver from his hip, and fired shot after shot, until all its chambers were empty, at the face of the murderer.

The shots had no more effect than so many blank cartridges!

The dwarf gave no sign that he felt or heard them—that he was even aware of the presence of any one save himself and his intended victim.

The sleeper did not move!

A moment the cruel knife was held in suspense, while the eye of the murderer fixed the exact spot beneath which lay the seat of life. Then it fell like a bolt of lightning, burying its keen blade to the hilt in the breast of the sleeper.

With a shriek of mortal anguish the doomed wretch woke and struggled to his elbow his eyes flying wide, his face drawn with pain and terror.

But instead of looking at his assailant, he fixed his wild gaze upon the cowering intruders into this chamber of horrors.

The dwarf heeded them no more than before, but drew forth his knife for another blow.

Its blade had glittered; now it was dark!

Once more he held it on high.

The menaced man betrayed no knowledge of the dwarf's vicinity; but his eyes seemed to plead with Honest Jack.

Jack could endure this no longer. With a fierce cry he sprang forward to the aid of his old chum, whom he fully believed to be a disembodied spirit, though he seemed to have the fleshly form of humanity there before him.

But he did not reach his side. At his very feet the earth seemed to yawn and belch forth sulphurous flame and smoke. The cavern was filled with a blinding glare; while it seemed as if all the fiends of the nether pit united in sending up a chorus of yells.

Stunned, bewildered, Honest Jack reeled back, while the chamber echoed with the sound of myriad footfalls, as if a panic-stricken host were flying in every direction through the corridors.

Then fell the dead silence of the tomb.

CHAPTER VIII.

LURED TO AN UNKNOWN FATE.

For a time Charley was as much stunned as his "pardner." But though bewildered, his mind was not paralyzed by superstition.

He naturally looked to see what had become of the two men who had been momentarily hidden from view by the sudden and intense glare of light.

They had vanished, leaving no trace behind.

"Why, they are gone!" he cried involuntarily.

"Of course. What d'ye expect?" asked Honest Jack.

Not without some fears, yet sternly resolved not to be the dupe of trickery, if bold investigation would prevent, Charley hurried over to the spot where the murderer and his victim had last been visible.

He examined the floor of the cavern, stooping to bring his eyes closer to the ground.

"What is it, boy?" asked Jack, from where he stood.

Charley rose and looked about him, seeming to snuff the air.

Then with his eyes flashing, his lips set firm, his head erect, and his step like that of a conqueror, he walked back, deliberately took down two more skulls, and said:

"Come here, Jack."

"What is it, boy?" said Jack again, reluctantly following him.

Charley held the skulls so that their vague

light was cast directly upon the floor of the cavern.

"What do you see there?" he asked.

"A black smudge, whar the brimstun come up and the spooks went down," replied Jack.

"Not so fast," objected Charley. "You see a black smudge. The rest is inference—mere guess-work."

"But we seen the brimstun burn, an' the spooks—whar be they? Whar do sich-like generally go to?"

"What do you see in the air about our heads?" asked Charley.

Jack looked about on every side.

"Nothin'," he answered.

"Oh, yes you do," insisted Charley. "You see a cloud of white smoke that was not here a minute ago."

"That o' course, an' smell it too," admitted Jack.

"Did you ever see or smell anything like that before?"

"Brimstun."

Charley laughed.

"When we have made up our mind to one thing, how blind we are to everything else," he said. "Jack, your ghosts have one characteristic of the earth earthy."

"An' what's that?"

"They burn good honest powder!"

Jack smiled sadly.

"I know how it looks to you, boy," he said. "I'd say the same anywhar but hyar. But see how easy it is, as you say, to see only what ye want to see, an' to furgit what ye don't want to remember. You fired six shots into that ornery critter at ten paces, an' I know that you know how to shoot. Then whar did ye ever see a galoot that was bullet-proof before this'n?"

"It does seem strange," admitted Charley, the old bewilderment coming back upon him, in spite of his struggle to resist it. "But there must be some natural explanation for all that."

"Ye'll never give it up, I know," sighed Jack. "I don't look to see ye."

He turned, while Charley had his eyes still fixed thoughtfully on the smudge-spot.

"Jack."

But Jack made no answer.

Charley looked up inquiringly.

The hunter stood in an attitude of rapt attention.

"What is the matter?" asked Charley, struck by his manner.

"Hark!" whispered Honest Jack, raising his hand to enjoin silence.

Charley listened.

From somewhere—he could judge neither the distance nor the direction—he heard the regular clank!—clank!—clank! of ponderous chains, as if some heavily-ironed prisoner were slowly pacing his dungeon.

They waited breathlessly.

The sound grew louder.

"It is coming this way!" breathed Charley, feeling a shiver go through him at the ominous sound.

Jack said not a word. He seemed stupefied.

"Jack! what is the matter with you?" whispered his companion, seizing upon his hand, to rouse him.

The hand was like ice. The bold hunter trembled perceptibly. His eyes were set in one direction.

The cloud of gray smoke that filled the chamber hung in the air like a pall, making the place even more gloomy.

Charley strained his eyes, but could see nothing.

Clank!—clank!—clank!

It drew nearer and nearer, until it came within the chamber.

Then they saw it—a man, seemingly, in a flowing black robe, which fell from his shoulders to the ground, hiding the chains (if they were real metal of the earth), with which he was shackled. The folds of his dress were traced with the same pale, blue light, which shone from the skulls, so that the outlines of his figure could be made out as he walked in the dark. His face, too, looking ghastly white when he came within the space lighted by the skulls, was faintly luminous when he stood in the shadow, producing an effect more weird and startling than anything our friends had yet witnessed.

"Look, boy! It's Joe!—it's Joe!" gasped Jack, pointing at the man, who moved like a sleep-walker, looking neither to the right nor to the left, heeding nothing.

"And see! see!—my God! the blood!"

Charley recognized the face of the man he had just seen stabbed by the dwarf. He walked with his head hanging on his breast, his eyes on

the ground. At every step a small jet of dark fluid, the sight of which made Charley shudder, spurted from his breast.

Desperately the youth struggled against the agony of dread that seized upon him. But he could not resist the effect of Jack's disturbance, greater now than ever before.

He remained with his arm extended toward the dread object, slowly turning as it passed along directly over the spot where they had just stood.

He stared at it unwinkingly, with glassy and bulging eyes, repeating below his breath:

"It's Joe!—it's Joe!—it's Joe!"

The apparition crossed the chamber without heeding; but at the mouth of a corridor he turned, looked fixedly at Jack for some seconds, and then slowly raised his arm with a beckoning motion.

Thrice he repeated his gesture, the chains hidden by the flowing sleeve of his gown clanking dismally.

"Hyar, pardner, hyar!—I'm comin'!" gasped Honest Jack, with his eyes starting from his head, his jaw dropped, and his breath coming in spasmodic pants.

The specter turned and strode slowly on.

Honest Jack followed, step by step, as if drawn by some outside force.

"Jack! Jack! for God's sake you are not going to follow him into the darkness!" was Charley's dismayed appeal.

But Jack's faculties seemed chained as by fascination.

"Jack! Jack!"

And Charley caught hold of him to stop him.

But his strength was as nothing. He was drawn along, the hunter making no effort to free himself, nor indeed heeding his boy, but going forward steadily, as if not held.

So they went, Charley no longer able to resist, but hugging close to his partner, all his strength of will now swallowed up in blind, unreasoning fear.

At the mouth of each new corridor, after crossing a chamber—(all was pitch-dark; and they could tell corridors from chambers only by the echoes)—the specter turned, gazed for a moment, while they, too, stood still, breathless, and then slowly waved his arm thrice, still beckoning them on.

And still they followed, piercing deeper and deeper into the Stygian labyrinth.

Finally they heard the sound of flowing water; and as they entered a chamber their specter guide stopped, turned round, and held up his hand, checking their advance.

They stopped, cowering together and clinging to each other.

Then their guide, with his vacant eyes fixed on Jack to the last, slowly sunk from view, as if going down into the earth.

"Jack," whispered Charley, "that is running water—an underground river."

"The same that we seen take in the dwarf," replied Jack. "It's ha'nted by pore Joe's sperrit."

Charley shuddered in spite of himself.

"Let us go away," he said.

"No," objected Jack. "I reckon he ain't brung us hyar fur nothin'. Thar's no use a-buckin' ag'in' sperrits an' sich."

"Hark!"

Charley thought that he heard some one breathing near him.

Jack heard it too.

"They're all around us," he said, as if that were a matter of course.

And indeed it seemed as if he spoke the truth.

Shrinking closer to his companion, Charley gazed about, straining his eyes wide in the vain effort to pierce the darkness.

But Jack, who had been steadily gazing directly before him, suddenly tightened his grip on his boy's hand.

"Look! look!" he whispered.

And Charley saw.

The specter was again rising slowly into view, but apparently at a greater distance than before.

When he stood clearly revealed, he beckoned again, with his slow, majestic movement.

Charley felt Jack's muscles grow rigid.

The specter waved them forward.

Jack advanced a step.

Charley, clinging to his arm, held back.

"For God's sake, Jack! he will draw us into the river."

Jack answered not a word.

The specter waved his arm once more.

Jack advanced another step, as if drawn by an irresistible power.

"Jack! Jack! you must rouse yourself. Let us go back. Come! it will require but one ef-

fort to break away from this horrible fascination."

But the specter still commanded; and step by step Jack still obeyed.

"My God! what can I do?" cried Charley, in an agony of despair indescribable. "I am responsible for all this. But for my obstinate persistence, we should never have entered this accursed place. He tried to stop me; and now I cannot restrain him. Jack! Jack! where is your manhood? Are you a coward, that you allow yourself to be so overcome?"

But Jack made no reply. His muscles were as tense as bars of steel. He was breathing with the rasping respiration of a man in nightmare. Step by step he drew nearer and nearer the fatal plunge, dragging his boy after him; for, unconsciously doubtless to himself, his hand had closed about Charley's like an iron clamp.

Despairing of saving his "pardner" from the fate to which he was walking, the natural instinct of self-preservation turned Charley's thoughts to his own safety; and as they reached the very brink of the river whose ceaseless flow seemed to woo them to its deadly embrace, he sought to free his hand, only to find it held fast.

Youth does not readily sacrifice itself on the altar of friendship, or any other. The life currents beat warm and high in the breast of our young hero. Death was an enemy to be fought to the last gasp.

But, though now he began to struggle with frantic energy, the giant hunter was as immovable as a pillar of granite.

So they stood on the very brink of the grave, there in the darkness, buried no one could tell how deep away from the sunlit world.

And still the specter waved them on. But now Jack stood motionless.

He could hear the river flowing beneath him, its surface an unknown distance below the bank on the verge of which he stood. Was he daunted?

Charley made a last wild appeal.

"Jack! Jack! for God's sake, are you determined to drown us both?"

Jack stood still.

And the invisible throng whose breathing only they could hear, seemed to have gathered at their backs, as if to push them over, if need be.

Again the specter beckoned, his eyes now become, stern.

Jack drew his foot to the side of the one forward. Would he step out upon the empty air, and go plunging down! down! into that night-shrouded abyss?

He paused; he hovered on the very brink! he seemed to draw himself together; then with a cry as if his very soul tore itself away from the thralldom that had thus far bound it, he leaped back, turning to rush headlong away through the impenetrable darkness.

He had taken scarcely a step when he plunged into what might have been a troop of bears, or (if such things were) of shaggy satyrs.

Whatever it was, the force of his huge body bore it to the ground, and they rolled in a mass.

Then followed a mad struggle!

Charley felt himself sized by foes of whom he knew only that they were hairy. They might be counterparts of the hideous dwarf. They seemed innumerable.

They uttered snarling cries and inarticulate chatterings, like beasts. It seemed as if they would tear him limb from limb.

It was horrible beyond words!

Struggle as desperately as he might he was overpowered, plucked up from the ground by arms and legs, swung once forward and back and flung into the air.

A moment of awful, agonizing suspense, while he awaited an unknown fate, then a splash; and the waters of that underground river closed over his head! He felt that he was in the icy clutch of death!

CHAPTER IX.

A NEW HAND IN THE GAME.

Charley swam like a cork, so he would have no fears from the water, if only the open sky had been above his head. But the feeling that every moment was bearing him deeper into the bowels of the earth, to an unimaginable fate, filled him with an insane panic which left but one aim—to reach some shore, and stay his progress away from life, away from light, away from the haunts of all God's creatures who knew the blessed sun!

Striking out with all his might, he fought the mad fight for life in silence, with no thought of his "pardner," either to give aid or receive it.

Honest Jack's experience was not different from Charley's, save that his Herculean strength

enabled him to offer a more stubborn resistance to his hairy antagonists, and so delay for a time the inevitable plunge. But the good fight ended in a stunning blow, which left him with just sense enough to keep his head above water, but with no clear knowledge of his situation.

Therefore he too was silent, and neither of the partners, as yet, knew anything of the other's fate.

Charley swam without result until nearly exhausted, not, however, by the length of time, but by the vehemence of his efforts, when it occurred to him that, borne along in the stream, he of course had no clew as to its direction, and was as likely to swim with or against the current as across it. In fact, his course had been almost down-stream; and the set of the water from the banks toward mid-channel had prevented him from nearing the side.

Changing his direction, he presently struck the rocky roof, of such a slope that it forced his head under water.

For a moment he thought that all was over, that the river filled the mere culvert through which it ran, leaving no space for him to breathe in. Then he knew the mad terror of struggling hand to hand with death. And such a death!—more horrible than anything he had ever imagined.

When he got from under the haunch of the arch, so that there was room for his head to come up, he for a time could do nothing but gasp.

But he must know how cramped was the space above his head.

He shouted, and was frozen with horror at the result. He thrust up his hand, and it came in contact with and glided swiftly along a smooth surface, slimy with fungus growth, and (so he imagined, with a shudder of disgust) leeches and slugs, and such loathsome creatures as it makes the flesh creep to touch!

So near had death stooped! How soon would it close down upon him forever? Yet were it not welcome, so it came quickly? How could he endure to drift—Whither? Into what awful reservoir of the earth? Could imagination picture what repulsive forms of animal life might harbor in such a place? Was he to be the prey of some hideous devil-fish?—some monster without name among men?

A sudden shock and—

He sat astride upon a rock. How he got there he could not have told. There are moments which lie just between life and death, when men can give no account of their actions.

But he was there!—and his heart bounded with exquisite delight; though just wherein lay the advantage of his present position he would probably have found it difficult to explain.

His second thought was of his "pardner."

"Jack! Jack!" he cried.

"Eb, boy? You are alive? Thank God!"

"This way, old man! I am on a rock. Never say die! Hurrah!"

"Too late! I'm past ye," came the reply from lower down. "Good-by, boy!—good-by!"

Charley's voice sounded clear, proof that there was a considerable space above his head. Jack's parting salute was muffled, as if coming through a flue.

"Jack—Jack!" he shouted frantically.

But no sound came back. His faithful friend had gone on down the culvert-like passage through which flowed this river of night.

The awful suspense of that moment brought strange fancies to his brain. The invisible rocks that shut him in seemed to recede until they were as far away as the sky that spans the actual earth, and to form a starless firmament over a boundless sea, in midst of which jutted up the solitary crag to which he clung alone—oh! how awfully alone!—the sole survivor in a wrecked world, wrapped in darkness that no pitying ray of light would pierce forevermore!

In the agony of that indescribable desolation, he shrieked out:

"Help—help! oh, God!"

Meanwhile, Honest Jack was being hurried on to his unknown destiny.

The stout-hearted hunter had faced death a hundred times without flinching; but that was in such forms as seemed to have the warrant of nature. The circumstances which attended his present peril were appalling.

But he had not long to endure the horrors conjured by superstitious fancy.

Suddenly his head struck the stone roof, and he went under with a gurgle. The water filled its passage full!

The shock took him so unawares, and his immersion followed so at once, that he had not

time to properly take breath. But that seemed of little moment. What signified a few seconds more or less? All was over. This, then, was the end!

There was no frantic struggle, no battling hand to hand with death.

His faculties seemed to swoon into the stupor of utter helplessness.

Consciousness was at the last ebb, when suddenly the world burst once more into light, and he found himself creeping on hands and knees, and belching and coughing the water from his gullet and windpipe; while the dazzling sunlight of broad day blinded him, so that he had no clear idea of just what had happened.

When he had collected his scattered wits he found that he was seated on the margin of a stream, a little distance below where it flowed from the base of a cliff like a boiling caldron. The river that had engulfed Joe and the dwarf at one side of the cliff had vomited him forth to the world again at the other.

"An' the boy might have escaped the same way, if he hadn't struck that rock," he reflected anxiously. "Now he'll hang on until he's nearly dead, an' then go to the bottom like a plummet. Luck's dead ag'in' him all 'round."

He still clung to the belief that everything connected with the affair was controlled by supernatural agency; and yet he dared not leave the spot, for fear that the body of his boy might make its appearance with life not quite extinct.

So the faithful fellow watched through three days and nights, without food or sleep. Then, almost on the borders of delirium, he gave up the fruitless vigil.

"It's no use," he sighed. "They've got him, shore! Ef the old 'un hadn't a hand in it, he'd 'a' dropped into the water by this time, an' come down with the current. Pore boy! pore youngster!"

Then, haggard and wild-eyed, he might have been seen staggering among the crags, painfully making his way to a mining camp of which he knew, muttering to himself and shaking his head despondently.

After the Indian outbreak Ridley had risen phoenix-like on its old site, but re-christened Canyon City. The old-time flume and "cradle" had given place to the thundering quartz-crusher. The one squeaky fiddle, to the music of which the boys had "hoed it down" in their "stag walk-rounds," would have been "no-whar" in the crack dance-house where the new set held their revels. And card-sharps and road-agents—But it is enough to say that Canyon City was a pinking little place, with all the modern improvements.

When half-famished and half-crazed Honest Jack staggered into Bob Willet's place, the hub-bub ceased, and he became the center of curious observation.

"Gents," he said, "ef so be you've got ary bit o' Christian grub layin' around loose, let's have it thunderin' quick."

His wants were supplied, with a proper check upon his ravenous appetite; for they had seen men in his condition before, men who returned from a solitary prospecting tour with just strength enough to creep into the presence of their fellows and beg their charity.

He then slept without break for twenty-four hours; and woke with a hole inside of him—so he said—as big as a barn-loft.

When this was comfortably filled with a "square" meal, he told his story; and great was the marvel thereat. It spread through the camp like wild-fire in the prairie-grass, soon reaching the ears of a grave-looking gentleman, who had come to the camp only that day.

Registering himself as Mr. Watson of New York, he had at once been dubbed "Judge." It was supposed that he was a capitalist, "takin' the lay o' things on the quiet," and much deference was shown him by the "solid men" of Canyon City.

On hearing of Honest Jack and his wonderful experience, Mr. Watson sought him out at once, introduced himself, and requested an interview.

At sight of him Honest Jack's jaw dropped, and he stared blankly.

"My face probably seems familiar to you," suggested Mr. Watson.

"It do, stranger, for a fact," admitted Jack.

"I am Charley Grover's uncle," was the quiet announcement.

"His uncle! Ef the Lord had only sent ye a leetle sooner! But it's too late now—too late!—too late!"

"What is this strange story I hear, as coming from you?"

Jack went over the experience of the eventful days since Charley's discovery of the cave.

Mr. Watson listened with no marked outward expression of feeling; though for all that he felt deeply the uncertainty which shrouded the fate of his nephew, until Jack came to Charley's announcement that he had found his cousin, supposed to be dead since childhood. Then he rose to his feet, suddenly, as pale as death.

"What!—my child?" he cried, huskily, brushing his hand across his forehead.

"Pardner, ye'd better take somethin' to stiddy yer nerves," suggested Jack, pushing across to his side of the table the bottle of wine which Mr. Watson had opened. "You look powerful bad. But ye ain't to think that this was a ginooine flesh-an'-blood gal, ye onderstand. Couldn't the Old 'Un give her the look of ary one he pleased?"

But Mr. Watson broke in with a storm of hurried questions touching the person of the dwarf; then, while his head seemed to swim with the tide of strong emotions, he again staggered to his feet, muttering:

"The same! the same! the very same!"

Then, seizing Jack's arm, he went on hurriedly:

"My dear sir, I rely on you to help me where you alone can be of service. You have shown strong affection for my nephew—so strong that you willingly exposed yourself to what you believed to be more than mortal peril, rather than leave him to face the hazard alone."

"Why, stranger," said Honest Jack, as if in this all was said, "he was my pardner!"

Mr. Watson caught at the feeling which makes the tie of "partnership" closer than brotherhood.

"And, if alive, is your partner still?" he said.

"Ah, yes!—if alive!" sighed Jack, with a regretful shake of the head.

"If dead he must have come down with the current. If we fail to find his body in the stream, that will be evidence that he is still clinging to the rock."

"Boss, they could wipe him out, ef they was so minded, so clean that thar wouldn't be a grease-spot left!"

"But are you willing to rest in such a doubt? If he is alive, don't you love him enough to run the hazard for the second time in the hope of being able to rescue him?"

"Stranger, ef I knowed he was alive, I'd have him out o' thar ef I had to blast the hull mountain out."

"Will you then guide me to the spot and aid in the exploration of the underground river? I will make it well worth your while—"

"Hold on, boss!" said Honest Jack, with a sudden air of dignity. "Jack Mowbray ain't a hireling. Ef ye owned the Comstock ye wouldn't have enough o' the filthy to pay me fur reaskin' my own pard!"

"Well, then, you will place me under undying obligations. I fully believe that a pitying Providence has at last sent us in the way of my lost child. Oh! if she is given back to us, it may be the means of turning aside another calamity which now hangs over me like a menacing shadow. My wife, the poor child's mother, who has never ceased to brood over her early loss, is now brought to the brink of the grave by the death of our only remaining child. This restoration will give her something to live for. I am rich, so that I can get any number of men to aid us in our search. I ask you to act as our guide."

"Stranger, take a fool's advice, an' give that thar cave a wide berth."

"Excuse me if I do not share your belief in the supernatural. I do not question your statement of facts as they seem to you."

"I onderstand ye. But you'll find that the men o' this hyar camp are o' my opinion."

"Then I will go for help elsewhere; and if in the end I can get nobody who will venture with me, I will go alone."

"Ye're as sot, I see, as the boy," said Jack, who never let true pluck pass without its meed of admiration. "But it shall never be said that Jack Mowbray took a back seat when thar was them as was tryin' to pull his pard out of a hole. Ye don't go into no cave alone, ye onderstand. Fetch on yer men; an' ef thar's any as is ready to foller whar I darsen't lead, use me fur an oven-swab!"

Honest Jack got on his feet with a look of dauntless resolution on his face.

Mr. Watson gripped his hand.

"With God's help, we'll rescue them yet!"

CHAPTER X.

WHO DARES?

A MOMENT later a man stood before Bob Willet's saloon, with his hands held about his mouth

so as to collect the sound, shouting at the top of his lungs:—

"Oh yes! oh yes! OH YES!"

The effect of this primitive way of calling a meeting was quickly seen. Men flocked from every direction, with looks of the liveliest curiosity. Eager discussion of "what was up" arose as soon as any two got within hailing distance of each other.

But no one could give any information, until Mr. Watson got up on a nail keg and began to harangue the crowd.

Knowing that the story had probably grown in wonders as it passed from lip to lip, he first picked out the bare facts, and had Jack admit to the crowd that just that and nothing more had happened. In this he showed his shrewdness; for, as told by him, the story was shorn of much of the mystery that it had received from Jack's lips in the first telling. By his choice of words he left the marvels half explained; so that when he went on to show that the whole thing might have been done by trickery, he did not seem to have very much to account for, after all.

It was all done so glibly, yet with such seeming fairness, that though Jack felt that there was something "crooked" about it, he could not tell just where the "twist of the wrist" came in. Moreover, having struck hands with Mr. Watson, it was not for him to put obstacles in his path; so he raised no objections.

"Now, gentlemen," concluded the speaker, "whether you fully agree with me or not, I think I can make it worth your while to run some risk in this matter. I want twenty-five men to help me ransack that cave from one end to the other. I will give you fifty dollars apiece if we find my nephew, dead or alive, and one hundred dollars if we find my child; and the man who first lays his hand on either of them gets an extra hundred."

"An' the fun throwed in!" shouted one who counted that the biggest part of the inducement. "Whoop! count me in that thar crowd, jedgel! My name is Hell fire Bill, an' I was raised on brimstun' an' limburgher!"

This reckless fellow spoke the right word at the right time. The crowd took their cue from him, and Mr. Watson found himself besieged by those eager to go.

He had but to select the best men, who were at once called "the paid gang," to distinguish them from the crowd of volunteers who swore that they would not be left behind when there was any fun afoot.

While willing to let as many go as chose, Mr. Watson was wise enough to separate the men on whom his main dependence was to be placed, and to properly organize and officer them.

So Canyon City almost to a man set out for the haunted cave.

Arrived at the mouth, their leader again addressed them:

"Now, gentlemen, what we want is a lot of torches and a raft."

They were soon got.

By dividing his force into several exploring-parties, Mr. Watson was enabled to greatly lessen the labor of examining every part of the cave, while by leaving a guard in each chamber he avoided the danger of having played upon him the trick that had led the first adventurers astray.

So the galleries were soon streaming in every direction with men lighted by flaring torches; the clang of their heavy boots, the muffled growl of their base voices, were enough to frighten the ghouls of whom they were in quest.

They found no chamber of skulls; but in time they reached a point where their further progress was checked by a yawning black gulf, in the bottom of which flowed a river of jet.

Flaring their torches down into the abyss, they could see the swift-flowing water ten feet below. It came from one blackness and passed on into another.

"Here we are, gentlemen," said Mr. Watson.

"Now for the raft, and the man who has nerve enough to venture down that stream."

The men gazed, but stood silent.

To be in company, with the firm earth under your feet, is one thing; to venture alone on such a voyage—They felt fine chills creeping along their spines!

The raft was brought and launched, after a long coil of heavy and a similar one of light rope had been fastened to it.

"Perhaps we had better begin by fixing a torch on the raft, and letting it float down as far as we can see it," suggested Mr. Watson. "If we can draw it back without accident, that will be some assurance of safety."

This idea was acted upon.

As the raft floated down on the tide, the torch seemed to be swallowed up by a black-throated monster.

It quickly disappeared, not from a bend in the course of the stream, but because the roof of its channel soon descended until it seemed almost to touch the surface of the water.

This was not calculated to awaken confidence. If anything, the men gained a clearer idea of the peril that awaited whoever dared brave it. They stood round with lowering brows and compressed lips.

Nothing was said aloud, but one muttered to a chum:

"Pard, ye hyear me? The man who goes down thar is gobbled up off o' that thar thing, as sure as shootin'!"

Two or three nearest him turned their heads; and though they did not catch his words, his looks deepened their feeling of dread.

"Draw back the raft!" ordered Mr. Watson, who felt the sudden damper on the enthusiasm of his followers.

The raft was drawn back, bringing the torch again into view as from the mouth of the nether pit.

The same man who had spoken before now muttered again:

"They ain't takin' torches when they kin git men!"

Mr. Watson looked his way, but he had slunk from sight.

"Well, gentlemen, who is willing to make the venture?"

The men stood in gloomy silence, looking not at their leader, nor at one another, but at the blackness which seemed to be waiting to devour them.

"Has no one the courage?"

The quiet tone of the speaker stung every man present. They winced, and their brows knit more tightly and their lips were more firmly locked. But no one stepped forward; no one spoke.

"Will five hundred dollars be any inducement?"

The men looked now into one another's faces. Each wished to see if some one else was ready to put his life in the balance against a sum of money.

For a moment there reigned profound silence. Then all were electrified by a voice—Honest Jack's.

"Boss," he said, deliberately, "as I told ye, Jack Mowbray ain't a-takin' no money fur sarvin' his pard. But I'm the man that ain't afeard to go down that way ag'in. Ef so be I don't come back—Waal, I reckon it won't be no great loss to nobody as I leave behind."

Mr. Watson grasped his hand gratefully.

"My brave fellow!" he exclaimed, "believe me, I do not like to expose you to that peril again. I will not pretend that it is less than it is. A dip in the roof may force you under the water, or a bend in the channel may make it impossible for us to draw you back."

"That's all co-rect. But ef I git nipped, I'll take my chances o' goin' through as I did before."

"How can I express my gratitude to you?"

"Don't try. Remember I'm doin' it fur the boy."

Without more ado he let himself down on the raft.

Several torches were handed to him, one of them lighted.

Lying down on his side, so as to go feet-first into the opening, he held the torch in his right hand and the end of a small signal line in his left.

"Good-by, boys," he said. "Let her down easy."

"Don't take too much risk," urged Mr. Watson, who now began to feel nervous over the tremendous risk to which he was exposing a fellow-creature. "Remember, if you find a cross corridor, you are to plant a couple of torches and come back. Then we can explore further until we find the spot, and start in again from that point."

"All right, Cap. Now let 'er go."

Mr. Watson held the signal-line in trembling hands.

Several men held the cable to which the raft was attached, paying it out carefully.

In profound silence, in which every one heard his heart beat, the raft drifted down on the tide, bearing the brave adventurer out of sight. All stood breathless, as if waiting for some cry of distress or fear to come from the black mouth of the tunnel.

And still the rope glided snake-like through their hands, and no signal came.

"How far has he gone?" asked Mr. Watson,

in a hoarse whisper, when it seemed as if that silent suspense could be endured no longer.

Sam Wooton, whose general store had supplied the rope for the occasion, looked critically at the coil which was slowly lifting, round after round.

"Thar was a thousand feet in that thar coil," he replied, "an' I allow it's nigh onto half out."

Mr. Watson drew in a tremulous breath, as he wiped the cold sweat from his forehead.

Again silence reigned.

Now the men watched the slowly unwinding coil with a sort of fascination.

"Cap," suddenly called out Sam Wooton, who was at the head of the gang on the tow-line, "thar's somethin' up!"

CHAPTER XI.

A DEATH-TRAP.

"WHAT'S the matter?" asked Mr. Watson, nervously checking the flow of the signal line through his fingers.

"The strain is off this tow-line."

"That cannot be. See! you are holding back on it."

"Yes, against the draught of the current on the line. That would draw all the same, ef thar was nothin' at the end of it. But whar's the weight o' the raft?"

"Surely you must be mistaken," cried Mr. Watson, in a quavering voice.

"Not much! See! I can hold this alone. Let up thar, boys."

They did as he ordered; and the comparative ease with which he resisted the tug of the rope proved his words.

"The raft cannot have broken loose!" exclaimed Mr. Watson, tremulously, now giving utterance to the fear that had sprung at once into his mind. "I should have felt the sudden strain on the line."

"It may have run aground," suggested Sam.

"But we should have got a signal from him."

"Try him with one."

Mr. Watson acted on the suggestion nervously. No reply came.

Again he sent the question:

"What shall we do?"

There was no sign of intelligence from the other end of the line.

Mr. Watson despaired.

"You try," he said to Wooton. "My nerves are all unstrung. I can't tell whether I feel a faint reply, or not."

"Hold 'er, boys," said Sam, who had never had any consciousness of nerves in his iron body.

Leaving the tow-rope to his assistants, he took the signal line from Mr. Watson's shaking hands.

He drew it back and forth, as a fisherman does his trolling line, "feeling it."

"You've let it go slack," he said.

Then he drew it in, hand over hand, until it was taut.

"There's yer raft, fast enough," he said, showing that the line resisted any effort to pull it in further.

"Thank God!" breathed Mr. Watson, fervently. "Now lose no time signaling him."

Sam slackened the rope a little, gave four quick jerks, and then held fast.

A breathless silence of a moment. Then he tried again. Another interval, without results.

"Boss," declared Sam, positively, "ef thar's a live man at the other end o' that thar line, he ain't signalin'—not to-day!"

"But the raft is there?"

"Run aground on a rock, I should say."

"Then what has become of him?"

"You tell."

"Men!" cried Mr. Watson, now quaking from head to foot, "draw back the raft without a moment's delay. This must go no further."

Sam Wooton went back to his post.

"Stiddy, boys!" he cautioned. "Now, all together!"

They drew on the line. It came home perhaps two or three yards, and then abruptly stopped, resisting their efforts as stubbornly as if tied to a ship's anchor.

"It's no use, boss," said one of the men.

"What's the matter?" cried Mr. Watson, nervously.

"She's aground solid," replied Sam.

"Ef the Old 'Un hisself hain't abolt o' t'other end!" muttered the man who had twice before given vent to his superstition.

"But what is to be done?" cried Mr. Watson.

"We cannot leave it so. Here, men! take hold, more of you."

They did so, but with no heartiness.

For the first time Mr. Watson noticed that a look of sullen discontent was general among them. They had the air of men who were on the point of mutiny.

Sam Wooton saw this too, and a flash of anger came into his eyes.

"Bear a hand hyar. Come! come! lively!" he cried, with a sternness that plainly "meant business." "Now then!—all together!"

As they swung back he ran his eye over them.

"Hallo, thar, you sodgers!" he shouted, with an oath. "Ye ain't half pullin'. How in blazes d'ye suppose we're goin' to fetch 'er that way. Once more, now!"

But after exchanging glances, the men dropped the rope, as by common consent.

Sam Wooton, who understood what this meant, swore a round oath of indignant rage.

Mr. Watson stared in voiceless bewilderment.

"Judge," said one of the men, a self-appointed spokesman for the crowd, "ye kin see fur yerself that this hyar ain't jist right. Ef that thar raft was only run aground, we'd a' started 'er, ur fetched somethin' away, shore. I know as it's onlucky to pull any more ag'in' that thar line, an' fur one, I'm done!"

A murmur of approval ran through the crowd, the men exchanging glances to see that they were all agreed.

"Boys," continued the speaker, "the last man out o' hyar may git left!"

And taking a torch from a man who had held several while their previous bearers were pulling on the tow-line, he was about to lead an instantaneous retreat, in which he would have had no lack of prompt following.

"But, gentlemen," protested Mr. Watson.

He would have been helpless; but there was a more vigorous actor on the scene—one who understood better the men with whom he had to deal.

Dropping the rope which he now alone held, so that it began to run out, drawn by the tide, he sprung before the seceders, and faced them with a brace of drawn revolvers.

"Hold on, gents!" he cried. "Enough's enough, but too much is a plenty. You know me, an' ye know I ain't the galoot to stand no funny business. When I say biz, it's biz every time! Waal, it's biz now, you bet! The man who goes by me goes out feet first!"

Before this round challenge the crowd "took water."

One man tried to parley.

Sam Wooton caught him up before he had two words out of his mouth.

"Tom Busby, you're jest the man to put the first hand to that rope. You see it's runnin' out mighty fast. It won't pay you to let more'n about ten rounds more run off'n that thar coil. One! two! three! four! five! six! seven—"

A glance down the barrel of the revolver that was leveled at a point directly between his eyes, and Busby caught the line and stopped its progress.

"Now, gentlemen, don't be barshful!" said Wooton, sarcastically.

Sullenly they took hold of the rope.

"Now, at the word—go! One, two—fetch 'er home, boys!"

They did "fetch 'er home" with such a will that they went over backward in a heap.

"The rope has parted!" gasped Mr. Watson.

"Thar's no lie in that," admitted Sam. "Pull it in, boys."

It was drawn in and coiled down, several hundred feet of dripping hemp, with a ragged end.

"My God! and I sent him to his death!" groaned the unhappy man.

The crowd stood around glowering blackly.

Sam Wooton looked like a man who had nothing to suggest, but was waiting for orders.

While they stood thus, mute, the mountain was shaken as if the earth rocked to its center, and the cave reverberated with a roar such as no one present had ever heard before.

A moment of breathless dismay, in which the men looked wildly into each other's eyes; a united yell of blind terror, then a rush, pell-mell.

Mr. Watson, powerless to stem the tide, was still not swept along by it. He stood bewildered, yet with no purpose of abandoning his post without some further effort to rescue the brave man whom he felt he had sent down to death. He would soon have found himself in solitude and darkness, since he held no torch, had not Sam Wooton clutched him by the arm and dragged him along, shouting:

"Step out, man! Don't ye see that this hyar ain't no time fur stoppin' to palaver! After these rats have all scuttled out, how'll ye find

yer way back to daylight alone—hey? Step out, ef ye don't want to git left. I can't carry yer."

Mr. Watson realized the peril that menaced him; and though he was the last man to start, he gave the others little chance to leave him out of sight.

But scarcely had they traversed half the first corridor, when the cave was shaken by a second explosion, in no way calculated to lessen the mad panic in which the men were fleeing.

When they reached the next chamber, they found that the guard had already deserted their post, only the lurid gleam of their torches far down one of the passages showing the direction in which they had fled—hence the way out.

But the fleet runners of the rear party had gained upon the slow runners of the faithless guard, so that the men were soon stretched out in a line at intervals which enabled each to keep the next in advance in sight.

So they strung into the first chamber, to find it turned into a pandemonium. As each arrived he found all those in advance collected there, and soon learned that the exit to the outer world had been destroyed. The passage was choked by a mass of shivered rock, the work of a tremendous explosion.

They were entombed alive!

When this was fully realized, then followed savage mutterings and fierce looks directed toward Mr. Watson.

"He's the galoot as led us into this byar rat-trap!" growled one, with murder in his blood-shot eyes, and an equal significance in the way he let his hand seek his bowie.

Others were not wanting to pick up this unreasonable resentment; and an innocent man found himself likely to be torn to pieces, to sate the first fury of the maddened crowd.

But even as he stood at bay, there came a diversion. Into the chamber through one of the black-mouthed galleries staggered a shape that riveted every eye.

Was it human? It had the shape of a man; and yet so horrible was its aspect that at sight of it a yell of frenzied terror went up from the crowd, which finally took form in the cry:

"The devil! the devil!—it's the devil!"

Revolvers leaped from their holsters on every side; and the thing, whatever it was, would have been riddled with bullets, but that Mr. Watson sprung before it, throwing up his hands and shouting:

"Stop, men, stop! in the name of humanity! This is a man like ourselves!"

A moment the shape swayed, and then fell to the earth in a heap.

CHAPTER XII.

FOUND.

HONEST JACK found that the roof was so low that it would in no place admit of his standing erect, and in many it fairly grazed his body as he lay at length. Still he resolved not to make the return signal unless he found himself in actual danger of being nipped between the raft and roof, and drownded.

His slow progress made the way seem endless, until even his stout heart began to quail, when suddenly the raft stopped.

"P'raps they're splicin' on another piece," he thought.

Then came an agony of fear.

Suppose the splice were not made fast? When a man is to risk his life on a knot, it would be strange if he did not wish first to try it with his own hands.

So terrible became this uncertainty that even stout Jack Mowbray could stand it no longer.

He made the signal demanding to be drawn back.

No answer came.

He repeated the signal, jerking with all his might, equally without results.

Again he tried, and yet again.

Then he lay perfectly still, awaiting what was to come.

Nothing came.

The raft remained motionless. The smoke from his torch, annoying before, now became stifling. He rolled so that he could hold his nose close to the water, over the side.

Suddenly the raft glided on with the current, but not more than a yard, when it was as sharply snubbed up again, the signal line twanging like a bowstring.

At that Honest Jack uttered a cry of dismay. He did not have to reach over the end of the raft, to learn that the broken tow-line was drifting down under it. He knew that, in turning a bend in the course, the line had been drawn into a jagged notch of rock, by which one had been cut.

Then the clouds of his superstitious fears gathered round him again. Beyond question this was the work of the defied demons. For the time he lost sight of the possibility of rolling into the water, and taking over again the desperate chance of that terrible gateway through which he had once been ushered back to life. To his excited fancy it seemed that he was doomed to remain anchored there forever.

Then came a strange quivering of the mountain, accompanied by a dull roar.

But the suffocating smoke, which kept getting more dense the longer he staid in one spot, could no longer be endured. Whatever else awaited him, that must be escaped at once.

He cut the signal-line with a slash of his bowie, and was once more in motion, now as rapid as the current.

But he must not pass his boy without warning. So strong was his love, so steadfast his loyalty, that even amid the horrors of that terrible voyage he found time for such a thought!

And forthwith he set up the shout:

"Hey, boy! Whar are ye? Drop into the water, an' leave yerself to the stream. Hallo! hallo! Charley! It's Jack! Drop into the water! It's yer only chance. Hyar I come—Jack! Hey, boy! drop into the water!"

But the rock, like a malignant demon, seemed to hug down close, expressly to muffle the sound of his voice, and by confusing echoes make its articulations unintelligible.

But our young hero has been lost sight of over long. Let us see what had befallen him during the four days that he had been denied the light of heaven.

Once more his despairing cry in the last moment of extremity had called up an answer where none would have been hoped for. Clinging to his rock, he saw a gleam of crimson light pierce the darkness.

"Help! help! oh, help!" he cried.

The light approached with an irregular motion, now blown dim by the rapidity with which it was borne along, and now flaring up red and angry as it came to a stand.

He saw that it was the smoke-crowned flame of a torch, held above the head of a young girl, who was one moment hurried forward by pity, and the next halted by natural fears, while she tried to pierce the darkness with shrinking eyes.

"Who calls?" she cried. "Where are you?"

And his answer, while his heart leaped into his throat, was a ringing shout of recognition:

"Eveline! Eveline! Eveline! It is I, your cousin, Charley! This way! But mind where you step. Look out for the bank."

At the sound of his voice the girl started, and she uttered a low cry of wonder and delight. But when he came to the announcement of his relationship (he forgot that she could know nothing of this), a wave of crimson swept up over face and neck.

However, she hastened forward until she stood on the river-bank, and discovered his dangerous plight. Then all other feelings gave place to concern for his safety.

"Oh, how can I help you?" she cried.

"By standing there and letting your dear eyes shine upon me while I help myself!" responded our hero, who in a trice had recovered his spirits. "So I have found you at last! Well, it is worth even such a journey as I have taken, not to mention the delight of owing my life to you a second time. You must be a fairy. Never a scrape do I get into, but hey, presto! you appear, and the curtain falls on the happy lovers!"

With such merry jest did he accompany the unwinding of a lariat from his waist; and then: "Now, my dear, you see that stalagmite? One! two! three! and away!"

The running noose shot out like a serpent, and fell over the point of a glistening cone.

"Is it secure?" he asked. "If it slips, goodbye to you!"

"Oh! it shall not slip," replied the girl, with a swelling heart. "I will hold it down with my life!"

And standing upon the noose, she threw one arm about the cone, and with the other held the torch for him to see.

"Well, here goes!"

"Oh, be careful!" she called to him; and lowering her voice with sudden apprehension, "But hasten! I know not how soon we may be interrupted by the coming of my guardian."

Charley had already slipped from his rock into the water, to be swept out of sight in the darkness.

Eveline uttered a cry of fear.

"I'm all right!" came the cheery assurance.

The youth was manfully fighting the current, drawing himself against it hand over hand.

A moment later his head appeared above the edge of the bank, almost at Eveline's feet.

He was greeted by a glad cry of welcome, caught by the shoulder, and helped up with a strength born of activity in the open air.

Then, before his rescuer could guess his purpose, he had kissed her fairly on the mouth.

She started back with flashing eyes, but something which she did not yet understand, though she was soon to learn all its delightful mysteries, held her anger in check.

Charley laughed.

"Oh, that's all right! I'm your cousin, you know. Cousins have a right to kiss each other whenever they want to—that is to say whenever they are both agreed about it."

"My cousin?" she repeated, gazing at him shyly, yet plainly ready to accept as Gospel-truth anything he chose to tell her of the manners and customs of that strange world of which she knew nothing, yet longed to know so much.

"Oh, I forgot!" exclaimed Charley.

Thereupon he told her in a few plain words her true history.

The girl was stunned. She turned deathly pale and sunk down on a rock, trembling so violently that Charley caught the torch from her hand, and threw an arm about her waist to support her if she fainted.

But Eveline was in no danger of that young-lady weakness. It was the overthrow of her life-long confidence in the dwarf that shocked her.

"How is it possible that he could be so perfidious?" she cried. "And Bettina, too! I have loved her so long! Oh, it must be that she is somewhere in the world. Could not she be living where you might not know her?"

She gazed at him through tears that were fast gathering in her eyes.

"My poor child," he exclaimed, "it is a pity to destroy what has been the one comfort of your solitary life; but out in the world nobody ever supposes anything in a book like that to be true. It is not intended that they should—it is written only to amuse people."

She gazed at him with eyes widening with astonishment.

"And are the people in the world so untruthful that they think it amusing to tell each other things that are not so? I thought it was only the wicked that deceived others."

How Charley would have made her understand the difference between a novel and a lie, we are unable to say; for at that moment came an interruption that sent the subject out of both their heads.

It was such a roar of demoniac fury as only the dwarf could give utterance to.

He stood at the further end of the chamber, glaring at them, his repulsive face lighted by a torch which he held above his head.

Charley sprung to his feet in the dismayed consciousness that he had no weapon of defense save those nature had given. While in the water he had been forced to unbuckle the belt that held his revolvers and bowie, lest their weight should drag him down to death.

But a defender rose up before him. It was Eveline, her eyes blazing, her form drawn to its fullest height. She held a dagger in her hand, menacing her own bosom.

"Traitor!" she cried—"you who have wronged me as no one was ever wronged before!—dare to harm this brave youth, who has at last unmasked all your villainy, and I will kill myself before your very eyes."

It was plain that Miss Watson was taking a leaf out of the book which was her only guide in forms of address, as in everything else. At another time Charley would have laughed at her staid air. Indeed, in their after life, whenever he wanted to tease her, he spoke of himself as a "brave youth." But now he saw that it was serving him in good stead. The dwarf cringed before her anger.

"Evvy! Evvy!" he pleaded, in a whining tone, "have I not been a father to you all your life? And do you doubt me at the word of the first stranger you meet? As I told you before, he is in the interests of your wicked uncle; he will lead you to destruction. Oh, my child—"

"Liar!" cried the girl, white and trembling with indignation. "He is my cousin—the son of my own dear papa's sister! Would he injure me? Would he tell me what is not so? And who are you? Not one of my kindred."

"But one whose kindness and love you have proved every day since you can remember,"

argued the dwarf, willy. "Bettina's nurse was no kin of hers; yet she saved her from the plots of those of her own blood. And why should the son of your false uncle be any better than his father? See! He hides behind you, letting you threaten your own life to save his worthless carcass? And are not all cowards liars?"

His bitter sarcasm was well aimed. A surge of shame dyed Charley's cheeks, and forgetful of all prudence, he leaped by Eveline, shouting: "A coward, is he?"

He had no weapon save the torch he brandished; but he could not endure for an instant to stand in the light of a poltroon before the woman he loved.

He would have gone to certain death, but that Eveline threw her arms around him, at the same time tripping him with the quickness of lightning.

Taken off his guard, he was thrown headlong. With a snarl of demoniac triumph the dwarf leaped forward, a drawn bowie held in air, his bloodthirsty eye fixed on the center of the fallen youth's back.

But Eveline dropped on her knees beside her cousin, screening his body with her own, so as to bring her bosom directly in the line which the bowie must traverse to find his life.

"Strike!" she cried, looking the murderer unflinchingly in the eye.

CHAPTER XII.

BACK TO THE SUNSHINE.

THE dwarf shrunk back with a cry of horror.

"I love him!" cried the girl, who knew no reason why she should hide the promptings of nature. "He is the most beautiful thing in all the world. If you were to slay him I should die. Go! go! You are hateful to me! I shudder at the sight of you!"

Again the dwarf uttered a cry, as if her words pierced his heart. The scowl which alone others saw on his face had given place to pleading and pain.

"Evvy! Evvy! I have loved you!" he moaned. "You are the only creature that ever loved me!"

"Go! You have deceived me! I love you no longer!"

Tears were in her eyes. She began to sob. But her face did not soften. She still said:

"Go! go! leave me with him."

And the dwarf crept away.

Then the girl dropped her face in her hands, and sobbed bitterly!

But in the end Charley comforted her.

Then he set himself to the task of unraveling the mystery of her strange power over the dwarf; and from what she told him of her life he arrived very nearly at the truth.

His revenge on the father complete, the dwarf had conceived a strange love, akin to adoration, for the innocent baby that smiled in his face, as he had said, the only thing that ever loved him, and to keep her to himself, he had brought her out here in the wilderness. As she grew, he educated her, but only out of one book, which he made serve the purpose of binding her all the more closely to himself.

But from the very nature of his scheme, the time must come when the child, grown to womanhood, would demand to be taken back to the world, to her rightful inheritance.

Then he said to himself:

"I will gather wealth. When the time comes, I will take her back, as if to return her to her own; but there, by means of accomplices, I will make her believe that her uncle has squandered her fortune, and died a shameful death, of which she will wish never to speak to any one. Then I will make her mine for life, through gratitude, by taking her to Europe, where the fraud can never be detected, and lavishing my money upon her. She shall live like a princess. That will repay her for the loss of a father who could not be kinder to her than I shall be. And the world—this fiendish world!—owes me so much as this."

At first he began to search for gold honestly, and never was miner so diligent—never miser so hawk-like in his eagerness to pounce upon every shining grain. But fate seemed to mock him with failure, while she poured her treasures into the hands of men who scattered it, as soon as got, in idle debauch.

Then he organized a band of road-agents, making the cave their head-quarters, and securing it from prying eyes by practicing upon the superstition of men, and the yellow tide set his way.

"Gold!" he chuckled, as he let it run like sand through his fingers;—"and for gold men

will swear that this hideous trunk of mine is sylph-like in its airy grace!"

But his lawless companions knew naught of the bud of womanhood in his keeping; nor must she suspect the vile channel through which came the gold that was to make her life beautiful. So he kept her apart until the storm drove Charley into her arms. Then he destroyed the hut, and led her by a secret way into a part of the cave never visited by his band.

He might have killed Charley; but recognizing him by the family likeness as one of her kin, he dared not take the youth's blood on his hands, lest by some instinct she should detect it, and shrink from him in horror.

And now fate had robbed him, and brought the scheming and the toil of his life to naught!

From his first discovery of it, this cave, with its fantastic beauties, so like the weird dream of some hashish-eater of the Orient, had exercised a fascination over the imagination of the dwarf. For years he had wandered in solitude through its deserted halls, gazing upon Nature's grotesque handiwork, and weaving strange romances about it all, until he had come to know its winding corridors as one knows the passageways of one's home.

Now, with his soul wrong by an anguish such as few men could understand, he plunged, with no torch to guide his leaden footsteps, into the furthest depths of the cavern, there to wander in the darkness, without food, or drink, or companionship, beating his breast, tearing his hair, and at times wallowing on the ground and rending his flesh with his teeth, while from mingled blasphemies and prayers that would have made the hearer shudder, he passed to inarticulate cries such as are uttered only by a madman.

Then came Mr. Watson with his rescuing party.

If they had known what awaited them within—how all their lives hung upon the merest whim of this half-savage, half-crazed nature—not a man would have trusted himself within its black portal!

But their coming made it necessary for the dwarf to decide the future at once.

He sought his prisoners.

"I have come to give you a chance for life," he said; "but on one condition."

"What condition?" asked Charley.

"Swear that you will go away, and leave me with my own; and that you will never seek her again in life."

"Excuse me!" said Charley, with a sarcastic smile. "You could hardly expect me to make such a jug-handle bargain as that."

"Wait. I have inducements to offer."

"None that are sufficient, my dear sir!"

"I have gold to the amount of a million dollars, at least," pursued the dwarf. "This I will give to Eveline's exclusive control, on condition that she will live apart from her relatives, in Europe, permitting me to remain one of her household in any capacity, the humblest, so that I can but see her day by day. I will never interfere with her in any way. She need not even speak to me, unless from the prompting of her own heart. Only let me be where I can see her until I die. It will not be for long. It is possible that I may not live until my plans are completed. Then she will be free."

He saw a smile of refusal on Charley's face.

"Come and see my wealth before you decline to consider the proposal," he suggested.

"Oh, well, I have no objection to seeing your wealth," said Charley, thinking that the knowledge of its whereabouts might possibly be worth having some time in the future.

The dwarf led the way to another chamber, where in a secret repository he showed them a pile of canvas bags. One of these he opened and showed that it was filled with gold-dust.

"Well, Eveline, what do you say?" asked Charley, smiling in his confidence as to her answer.

"Never!" replied the girl, with flashing eyes; and slipping her hand into his, she turned her eyes his way, and immediately they melted into tenderness.

"You hear, my dear Cyriac?"

"One moment," said the dwarf. "I have another magazine to show you."

They followed him, and saw kegs of powder too numerous to count.

"The alternative," he said, "is that we shall be all buried here together."

"You will blow up the cave?" asked Charley, turning pale in spite of himself.

"In less than half an hour, if you do not grant my wish."

"Well, we refuse!"

"So be it."

They went back to the chamber in which they had been confined.

They waited.

At last came a terrific explosion.

They were both thrown from their feet by the concussion, but none of the flying rock reached them, nor did any part of the chamber in which they were, cave in.

Pale and trembling, Charley took a torch and penetrated the only avenue, except the river, leading from their prison.

It was choked up with a mass of splintered rock.

"That fiend has kept his word," he said. "There is no escape from here. We are buried alive!"

"We can die together," replied Eveline, and twining her arms about his neck, shrunk close to his heart.

But a moment later they heard a muffled voice calling lustily. It came from the river. They ran thither.

"It is some poor wretch in the water," said Charley. "We must save him, though, truth to tell, it is a question whether fetching him to a lingering death were not less merciful than leaving him to his fate."

He had given his torch to Eveline to hold, and got his lasso ready.

A raft, with a man lying at length and holding a torch, shot into view.

"Charley! Charley! Thank God, my boy!"

"Jack! Good heavens! Sit up, old man!—sit up!"

He whirled the lariat about his head.

Jack understood what was expected of him, and sat up.

A quick cast, and Charley took a bight of his end of the lariat around a stalagmite.

In a twinkling, Jack's torch disappeared from sight.

As he saw that the noose was about to settle down over him, he dropped his torch, joined his hands as a diver does, and carried them through a sweep, like a stroke in swimming, so that when his hands struck his thighs, the noose was about his body, held down by his arms. Then he rolled off the raft into the water.

Almost before Eveline realized what had happened, Honest Jack stood on firm ground, hugging her lover like a bear.

"Thank God! thank God! thank God!" was all he seemed able to utter.

But even the delight of being re-united with "the old man," could not make Charley forget Eveline for any great length of time.

"Here is your famous 'gal-spook,'" he said, with a merry twinkle, drawing Jack's attention to the girl, who stood wide-eyed and panting, plainly somewhat startled by the giant hunter's boisterous demonstrations of affection.

Jack turned, gazed into her beautiful face, flushed scarlet to the roots of his hair, and took off his cap with an awkward yet manly bow, stammering:

"Beggin' yer pardon, mum!"

The girl read his simple, honest nature at a glance, and with a brightening face said, impulsively:

"I like you!"

In proof of it, she extended her hand to him. That, as Jack said afterward, "fetched his boots clear up over his head."

But the anxiety of their situation soon claimed their entire thoughts.

Jack told how he had "gone through," and that seemed their only chance.

Charley looked at his cousin, and with a sensation of keen pain shooting to his heart, put his arm about her.

"If it were only Jack and I!" he said, wistfully.

"I am not afraid—not with you!" she answered, with a divine smile.

"Let that be the last resort," he urged. "We have not yet made a thorough examination of the passage to see if the rocks cannot be removed."

They went, to find that escape in that direction was hopeless.

Then returning, Jack approached the black river, to utter a cry of surprise as he stood on its bank.

"What is it?" asked Charley eagerly.

"Boy—boy, come hyar! The river's runnin' shoal!"

Charley sprang to his side. It was as he said—the surface of the water had fallen several feet.

"That blast must have reached to the river-bed, and tapped it somewhere. I believe we could wade in it. Hurrah! we've one trump left yet!"

Taking a turn of his lariat around a stalagmite, he let himself over the bank.

"Saved—saved!" he cried back. "It is only knee-deep! Come; let us wait for no accidents. We can make our way back to where we were pitched in, and then retrace the labyrinth from that point, with no danger of having our marks erased. Pass Eveline down to me."

Jack handed her over the bank rather gingerly, as if he were at a loss just how to take hold of her.

Then he leaped down himself; and they started against the stream, which grew shallower as they advanced.

Meanwhile, the man whose life Mr. Watson had saved, while, indeed, his own was menaced, proved to be a poor wretch, blackened almost out of human likeness by powder, and with one arm completely torn from his body.

"I reckon I'm done fur," he said, as Mr. Watson bent over him and revived him by draught from his flask of spirits; "but maybe thar's a chance fur the rest of ye. That devil has mines all over. Nobody knows how many. He could blow up any part of the cave he wanted to. He's buried all o' the boys along of himself, so that they shouldn't none o' 'em git away with the dust. But thar's a blast as goes to the river outside. It's fixed to turn the channel so that the culvert through the cave will run dry, in case we got ketched all round. Ef some o' you'll pack me, I'll show ye whar to touch it off."

But first Mr. Watson, when he found that this was a member of the band of outlaws over whom the dwarf was chief, questioned him eagerly about his child. The road-agent knew of no young girl associated with Cyriac, nor had he heard anything about the youth, whom he acknowledged they had thrown into the river by the dwarf's direction.

He was then carried according to his direction, and pointed out a certain stalagmite which seemed to be rooted to the primordial rock, but to move which from its base the united strength of three men proved sufficient. Beneath it they discovered the end of a fuse, to which they applied a torch.

"Inside o' three minutes that'll knock the bottom out o' the river above whar it enters the cave," said the wounded outlaw; "an' ye kin walk out dry-shod."

The explosion was too distant for them to hear it; but soon after they reached the river it began perceptibly to fall.

"Here, gentlemen, is deliverance," said Mr. Watson. "But first let us explore the channel downward. I cannot abandon the hope of rescuing my nephew, and perhaps my child."

They went, of course, to meet the other party coming up. And such a meeting! The dead was alive again, and the lost was found.

But another meeting as strange was yet to take place.

When they returned to where the wounded outlaw lay, and he saw Honest Jack, he called faintly:

"Pard! pard!"

Jack started at the sound of that voice; for it was the voice of Joe, not dead, but alive and in the flesh, though soon to go to his long reckoning.

"It was all a flam, pard," he said, when Jack was made to understand that this torn and blackened wreck was indeed his old "pardner." "I knowed you was too squar' to fine the boys; and so I took that dodge to shake ye. We've made things lively in these hyar parts, an' raked in enough dust to set us all up in Frisco fur gold-bugs. But the dwarf has piled half a mile o' rock on it all, an' onto the whole gang in the bargain. You won't never dig none o' that thar plunder out."

A prophecy which proved true. The dwarf had done his work well.

"But it's only fair to let ye into that sweet thing, the ha'ntin' business," pursued Joe, enjoying the joke even on the verge of the grave. "The tenderfoot that went off with the Injin to see the medicine cave was heaved over the cliff by the boys; an' they put a quietus on Mr. Injin too. That was when they dropped onto the ha'nted idee. It was easy to set the ball to rollin'. They laid out them pards too. Every man in the shebang when that supposed fracas took place was members o' the gang; so they could easy cook the story to suit themselves. An' the galoot that laid down in McAffrey's saloon, an' turned up his last jack so suddint! Dan doctored his bitters with aconitel. Then I jined the boys; an' you, pard, wa'n't slow blowin' the story. After that, every man that turned up missin' was supposed to have struck the ha'nted cave an' been sperrited off."

"The first night we slep' in the cave we chloroformed you with a sponge tied to the end of a stick, and packed you and your traps back to yer camp. The dwarf fixed you the same way the night he give yer ther slip, an' ag'in the second night you slep' in the cave. Then we took the bullets out of your revolvers, so's ye could enjoy yerselves pepperin' at the dwarf while we played our leetle tableau. But the boy's first shot was at the shadder of a bat, an' one of 'em put yer torch out."

"Thar was phosphorus in the skulls, an' they was turned by strings, too. Only the dwarf was too sharp to leave any give-aways round loose. You give 'em one pull, an' the strings slipped off. That's whar we got our plucky leetle rooster! Then wa'n't I fixed up harn-some! Thar wa'n't much as that thar shorty didn't know how to do. He coached me."

"He was tender on the boy, an' I hated like p'ison to fix you, pard—on my soul, I did! So it was our calcations to let ye off with a scare that 'ud keep ye out o' thar. But the boy didn't scare worth a cent, an' we jist had to souse ye! How in thunder you clawed up-stream gits me, fur a fact!"

Jack explained that he had gone down-stream.

"Waal, I'm blowed!" exclaimed Joe, in evident astonishment. "I'll swar that the dwarf didn't know that way out."

He was mistaken. Cyriac did know that exit, and that Jack had passed successfully through it.

At the last moment, when it came to the destruction of the only creature that had ever loved him, his heart had failed, and though he could not bring himself to liberate her with his own hand and see her go forth with her lover, he had left her that chance of life, hoping that Jack would penetrate to her prison, and show the captives that desperate way out.

And now a word more tells all.

Eveline was restored to her mother, and was the means of bringing that lady back to blooming health and happiness. The "brave youth" whom she so gallantly rescued and defended, has had the rare delight of showing her all the wonders of the strange world from which she was so long excluded. Once a year, at the anniversary of their memorable first meeting, they take from a cabinet where it is sacredly treasured, the veracious chronicle of Bettina and her woes, and Mrs. Charley Grover sighs a little over the vanished love of her childhood.

But hark!—what a racket! It is Honest Jack romping with his boy's little ones. Cured of superstition himself he chuckles to see them grow still and round-eyed, and huddle close up to his, as he tells them of THE HAUNTED CAVE.

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